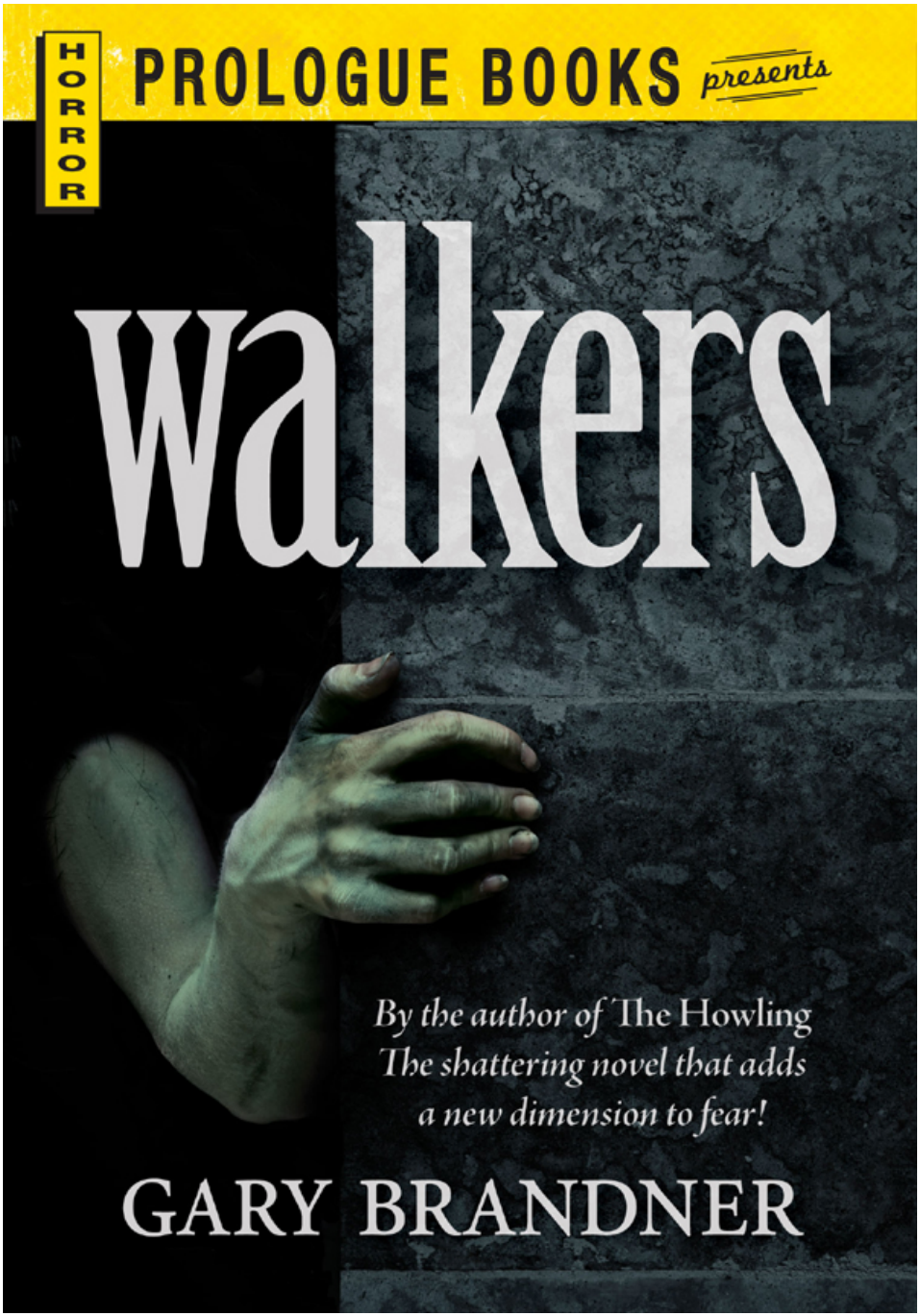
HORROR
PROLOGUE BOOKS presents
walkers
By the author of The Howling
The shattering novel that adds
a new dimension to fear!
GARY BRANDNER

THERE IS NO GOING BACK! YOU ARE ONE OF US!

Wordlessly Joana cried out her reply. *No! I do not belong here! It is not my time!*

Joana! Again the familiar voice calling her back. The voice of life. It gave her strength to resist the terrible power that was trying to draw her on to the unknown.

The rage of the people who lined the tunnel swept over her like a physical force. She retreated ever faster back the way she had come. Back toward life.

The terrible voice boomed again.

You cannot go back now! You have come too far. You can never return!

I can! Joana cried inside herself. *I am going to live*.

Like a scorching desert wind the voice roared around her, through her.

We will come for you. We will walk. We will bring you back.…

WALKERS

by
Gary Brandner

a division of F + W Media, Inc.

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Chapter 1

At ten o'clock on the eleventh of June the party at the Marina Village was hitting its stride. Colored spotlights played over the dancers while a driving disco record boomed from four huge speakers placed around the tile recreation deck. In the clumps of shrubbery that were scattered throughout the courtyard of the apartment complex, young couples sat together away from the music and talked softly about sweet private things. The long table where the food had been was a ruin of bent paper plates, crumpled napkins, chicken bones, chewed ribs, bits of salads, Frito crumbs, toothpicks, and bowls with just traces of dip remaining in the bottoms. Tubs of crushed ice contained cans of Michelob and jugs of Carlo Rossi burgundy. Beyond the dancers an empty, oversized swimming pool glittered a bright-lighted turquoise.

Joana Raitt danced easily and naturally to the thumping music. Her soft brown hair bounced at the nape of her neck, her hazel eyes were bright and alive under the stars. She looked good tonight in her clinging T-shirt and tight white jeans, and in a completely unaffected way she knew it.

Joana smiled up at the loose-jointed young man dancing with her. Glen Early tried gamely to move in time with the beat, but disco was simply not his style. No matter, he was obviously enjoying himself, and he was making Joana happy by being with her. Glen would not win any dancing prizes, but he was smart and kind and fun to be with. Joana had almost decided she was in love with him.

Out in the middle of the dancers, maneuvering over to where

he could get a better look at Joana, was Peter Landau. He was the most spectacular dancer there, and at the moment was thinking that the three hundred dollars he had sunk into disco lessons was money well spent. Peter wore a white linen jacket and pants with the trendy wrinkled look. His Western shirt was open to the belt buckle, displaying a profusion of curly brown hair. He did not live at the Marina Village, but was at the party as the guest of a girl whose name had slipped his mind. Kathy or Linda or something like that. She was intent on following his intricate steps, but Peter was busy watching Joana Raitt. There is class, he thought. Class, and a nice firm body.

He managed to boogie over close and pointed a finger at Joana with his thumb raised like a cocked pistol. “Hey, there, foxy lady.”

Joana gave him a quick, cool smile and returned her attention to Glen Early. For Peter it was as good as an invitation. He was pleased to see that the square-looking dude she was with could barely keep from falling over his own feet. He made up his mind that one way or another he would get that little brunette out and show her a few moves even John Travolta didn’t have.

• • •

“Friend of yours?” Glen Early asked, grinning down at Joana.

“Never saw him before. Who is he, anyway?”

“He’s with one of the girls who lives here. Claims to be a psychic or something. Whatever he is, the guy can sure dance.”

Joana glanced over at the transported Peter Landau. “He obviously thinks so.”

Glen frowned as he lost the beat for a moment, then grinned apologetically at Joana. “Some people got rhythm and some ain’t.”

“Want to take a break?” she said.

“Am I wearing you down?”

“It’s hot work.”

“I *could* use a beer,” said Glen. “How about you?”

“Sounds good.”

Keeping time more or less to the beat, they made their way through the gyrating bodies to the edge of the tile deck.

“I think I’ll go for a dip to cool off while you get the beers,” Joana said.

“Has it been long enough since you ate?”

Dear Glen, she thought, my protector. She said, “I don’t know. How long are you supposed to wait, anyway?”

“I can never remember for sure,” Glen said. “Thirty minutes, an hour, something like that.”

“I think it’s just a superstition,” she said. “Folk medicine. Anyway, I didn’t eat all that much.”

“You went back for seconds on the potato salad.”

“You noticed, you rat.”

He patted her lean flank. “That’s all right, you could use a little more padding.”

“Like hell. Go on and get the beers.”

Glen circled the dancers, heading for the ice-filled tubs. Joana looked after him fondly for a moment, then crossed the strip of grass between the tile deck and the swimming pool. The water looked supremely inviting, all cool and clean and blue under the stars of June.

She pulled off her shoes and saw the young man she privately thought of as the Disco King detach himself from the blonde girl he was dancing with and come toward her.

“Hi,” he said, “I’m Peter Landau. How you doing?”

“Fine. I’m Joana.”

“I know. Joana Raitt.” Peter inclined his head back toward the beer tubs. “You’re here with the engineer, right?”

“Glen Early. Right.”

“You’ve got good moves. You ought to try dancing with a little

faster company."

"Meaning you?"

"Meaning me."

"No, thanks. Excuse me now, I'm going for a swim."

"Maybe later we could get together?"

"I'm old-fashioned, I dance with the guy that brung me."

"I get it, he's the jealous type. How about if I call you some time?"

"I don't think so."

"Liberated, eh? Good, I like that." He took a card from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. "You call me, then."

"Don't hold your breath."

Peter smiled, displaying beautifully even white teeth. "If you don't get me, leave a message with my service and I'll get back to you. *Ciao*."

Joana shook her head as she watched him boogie on back to the blonde, who was growing noticeably impatient. Did anybody really say *ciao* anymore? In spite of his overdone come-on, she found it hard to dislike Peter Landau. He had an aura of hip innocence about him, if that was possible. She read his card.

PETER LANDAU

Psychic Counseling

There was an address in Laurel Canyon and a telephone number. Joana smiled and tucked the card into her jeans. Psychic Counseling. Wow.

She peeled off the T-shirt with the Los Angeles Dodgers logo printed across the front. Underneath she wore a new blue maillot with cutouts on the sides. Maybe nobody else felt like swimming tonight, but Joana had no intention of leaving the party without showing off the new suit.

She skinned down the tight French jeans and looked over to see

Peter Landau and a number of other young men watching her with frank admiration. She smiled and waved to them and dived into the water.

Joana glided along beneath the surface, her arms stretched out in front of her, her legs straight out behind, toes pointed. The water was like a caress, just enough cooler than the warm night air to be refreshing. As the momentum of her dive faded she kicked her feet rhythmically. She watched the tiled bottom of the pool drop away as the water deepened. The beat of the recorded music was still audible under the water, but it was muffled and distant, as though filtering through many layers of heavy cotton.

Joana planed her hands upward and kicked to the surface. She hung there for a moment treading water, breathing in the night air sweet with bougainvilleas. Over the rim of the pool she could see the bobbing heads and shoulders of the dancers. Somewhere a latecomer called a greeting to friends. A girl laughed. A bell buoy clanked out in the channel. It was a good party. Joana was glad she had come. The warm air, the cool water, the music, the other young people enjoying themselves, all made her feel good about her life. She rolled over into a crawl and started for the deepest part of the pool.

Something grabbed her by the leg.

The sudden pain was so intense Joana thought she was going to faint. She reached down for the back of her knee and felt the gracilis muscle bunched like a fist under the skin. Only when she opened her mouth to cry out did she realize she had sunk under the water.

Flailing with her arms, Joana clawed her way back to the surface. The cramp in her leg hurt her terribly, forcing the lower part of her leg to jacknife up against the back of her thigh. She coughed, and slipped beneath the surface again. Chlorine-tasting water filled her mouth and her throat. She tried to shout and a big

bubble of air wobbled from her mouth.

I've got to get out of here!

She reached toward the surface and tried to kick her legs. It brought a spasm of agony to the cramped muscle, and Joana found herself somersaulting deeper.

She lost all sense of direction, but somehow broke through again to the air. She tried desperately to fill her lungs, but water and phlegm blocked the passages. Only a few yards away the people danced on. Joana tried to call to them, but only a tiny sound came out. Several people looked over at her, smiled, waved, and kept on dancing.

Then she was under again. A great roaring filled her ears. Splotches of light danced before her eyes as the world began to grow dim.

This can't be happening!

Her brain sent messages that her muscles never received.

This is ridiculous. You don't drown in an apartment swimming pool with fifty people right over there and your boyfriend coming in a minute with two cans of beer.

Her arms and legs felt weighted with pounds of lead. She could no longer feel the pain from the cramped muscle, but it didn't matter since she couldn't move anything anyway. She saw mostly blackness now, with flashes of bright turquoise water.

God, I don't want to die! I'm only twenty-five years old and I haven't really done anything.

There was a ringing inside her head, hollow and echoing. All around her was dark. Her head ached fiercely. She had to breathe. She opened her mouth and pulled in water. Something inside her chest lurched, and there was no more pain.

• • •

Glen Early had watched Joana dive cleanly into the pool and

glide across just below the surface of the water, graceful as a dolphin. She really looked great. Better still, she was bright and she was fun to be with. She broke the surface and laughed out of the sheer joy of being alive.

He dug two icy cans of Michelob out of one of the tubs and pulled a couple of big styrofoam cups from a stack on the table. Joana even enjoyed drinking beer, for God's sake, and liked baseball. Glen felt like a very lucky young man.

He looked over toward the crush of people disco-dancing on the deck. Most of them lived here in the Marina Village complex, others he hadn't seen before. Some, like Peter Landau, were recurring guests.

Peter was putting on a show. Glen had to admire the grace and confidence he put into the dance steps. Quite a few of the girls were watching him rather than their own partners. The guy had something, all right. But he didn't have Joana.

Why, Glen wondered, did all these people look so much alike to him tonight? Young, untroubled, their faces unetched by any sign of character. Living here, Glen should have been one of them, yet he never quite felt as though he fitted in. He liked a party and a good time well enough, but he had a strong sense of responsibility. He thought a lot about the future, and about the world outside the Marina, two subjects which seldom concerned his neighbors. Joana, he felt, was different too. She could be as joyful and full of hell as any of them, but when he wanted to talk seriously, she would listen. Really listen. And she had ideas too. Yes, she was unquestionably something special.

Glen caught sight of her for a moment, splashing in the deep part of the pool, waving at some of the dancers. He grabbed a tortilla chip, scooped up a last bit of clam dip, and made his way around the deck toward the pool to join her.

When he reached the edge of the pool he did not see Joana at

first. Then he spotted her out near the center, swimming under water.

No, not swimming, hanging there suspended between the surface and the bottom. Her body rocked gently, weightless in the water.

It made him uneasy. “Come on, quit fooling around. The beer is here.”

Joana did not respond.

Of course not, he told himself, she can’t hear when she’s underwater.

He set the cans of beer and the cups down on one of the metal tables at poolside. He popped open the first can and poured. Joana still hung there under the surface. Glen put the beer down and looked more closely. Joana rolled over lazily, her limbs waving in the water like tentacles. Her eyes were wide open. Her mouth.

“Oh, Jesus!” Glen took one long stride to the edge of the pool and plunged in. The weight of his clothes — chambray shirt, denim vest, jeans — dragged him under. He kicked frantically out of his suede boots and thrashed across the water to the spot where he could see Joana floating below. He dived and reached for her. The flesh of her arm was firm and cold, like an eel. He got one arm curled around her upper body, mashing her breasts flat, and fought his way up to the surface.

“Help! God, somebody help me!”

The people nearest the pool looked over and reacted at once to the look of panic on Glen’s face and the lifeless form he was struggling with. Two of the young men ran to the pool. They jumped in and helped Glen pull Joana to the side and lift her up onto the strip of grass.

The dancing broke off in confusion and the rest of the people came running toward them. Glen knelt over Joana and stared into the white face and empty eyes. One of the girls turned away and

vomited.

“Is she dead?” somebody asked.

“Shit, look at her, man. She’s dead.”

Glen took her head between his hands. It seemed so small. Water ran from her mouth, her nose.

“Joana!” he cried. “Joana! Joana! Come back!”

Chapter 2

After the last great spasm inside her chest, Joana gave up the fight. She knew it was useless to struggle any more. The moment she relaxed, the pain in her head, her lungs, and her cramped-up leg went away. She felt just fine. All warm and comfortable and absolutely at peace.

The ringing, roaring sound was gone from her ears. There was only a nice, easy silence. And there was darkness, but it was snug and cozy, like a blanket wrapped all around her.

Gradually it began to grow lighter. Dimly at first, then with sudden clarity, Joana could see again. Pictures racing by faster than she could think. Pictures inside her mind.

She saw the happy little girl being lifted high to the ceiling by the smiling giant who was her father. And again, playing with Jordy, the gentle golden retriever, in her parents' big backyard. The tears of the day Jordy went down under the wheels of a truck.

Joana saw again the terrifying separation from her mother on the first day of kindergarten. And there were faces of other children she had long since forgotten, but which were as fresh now as though she had seen them yesterday. The images flashed by at an impossible rate, yet each one registered a clear, sharp image on Joana's mind.

She watched as the little girl's body began to change in the fifth grade, and new, confusing emotions filled her days.

Then she was in junior high school — dancing, boys, the beach. Trying out for cheerleader in high school, making it, and thinking no triumph would ever be as sweet. Falling in love at seventeen

with Bobby Mills, trying sex and not liking it at all, then trying it again and deciding it wasn't so bad.

The sunny day she entered UCLA and stood in the long lines to register for classes. Pledging Kappa Kappa Gamma and sitting together in a group at the basketball games in Pauley Pavilion where the Bruins always won.

Working during the summers in the lodge up at Mammoth. Getting serious with Gerry Roland from Sigma Nu and finding herself pregnant in spite of their precautions. The abortion that scared hell out of her, then was all over so fast she was almost disappointed. Settling down then to her studies and discovering at last that she had a mind.

Then graduation day with Mom and Pop sitting in the folding chairs set up on the campus lawn, looking like a painting by Norman Rockwell. Then the year she took off bicycling all over Europe and the crazy times with the German boy, Hans Klebber.

Coming home, getting a job, finding the little guest house to move into on Beachwood Drive above Hollywood. Meeting Glen Early at a UCLA Extension class, and liking him immediately. Their first date, a crucial game between the Dodgers and Cincinnati. The delight in finding how naturally their bodies fitted together. Driving out on the eleventh night of June to a party at Glen's apartment …

With her life brought up to date, the images vanished, and Joana was once again in the courtyard of the Marina Village Apartments. She floated, weightless, somewhere above the scene. Down below, the body of a young woman floated beneath the surface of the bright-blue swimming pool.

My body.

Joana felt no fear or shock at the recognition, just a vague sadness. She was sorry for the body. It looked so vulnerable, so … dead. Its eyes were open under the water, staring at emptiness. Hair floated in a brown cloud around the face. The body had nothing to

do with Joana anymore. It was just a cold, foreign lump of flesh with staring eyes.

She saw Glen come to the pool carrying two cans of beer. He looked at the body there in the water. At first he seemed puzzled, then frightened. He dove in and swam clumsily toward the body.

Dear Glen, you're too late. I'm sorry.

More people came running over from where they were dancing. They hauled the lifeless body up out of the pool, all pale white with the arms and legs flopping. Over all, the disco music blared and thumped.

They stretched the body out on the grass. How strange it looked, Joana thought. Just the tiniest bit familiar, like someone she had once met but never got to know.

Watching the frantic activity below as the people tried to revive the body, Joana felt utterly at peace. She floated free, unconnected in any way with the dead girl down there on the grass. Then ever so gradually the feeling of peace gave way to uneasiness. She knew somehow that this state of suspension was not meant to last.

I should be doing something, going somewhere. What? Where?

At first it was very faint, the barest suggestion of a tug at her senses. It became more insistent. Something was drawing her, as though magnetically, back and away from the scene at the swimming pool. The feeling was not the least unpleasant, and Joana gave herself over to whatever was pulling her away.

She was sailing, floating, flying without substance through a long, shadowy tunnel. Along the walls of the tunnel were shallow alcoves, and in these there seemed to be people standing, watching her. Joana flew past them at incredible speed, yet she had no real sensation of motion.

She watched the endless row of faces go by. They appeared to be smiling, warm and welcoming. Here and there along the way

was a face Joana seemed to know, but before she could place it, a new, strange face had flashed into view and out again, to be replaced by yet another.

Far, far up ahead she could see a bright circle of light that was the end of the tunnel. Even at this immense distance Joana could make out the silhouette of a seated figure there waiting for her. It looked like a man, but she could not be sure. The light seemed to emanate from the figure.

Joana felt an overpowering attraction to the seated figure. All she wanted to do was hurry there and join him in the warmth and protection of the light. The figure beckoned to her gently, and Joana willed herself to fly ever faster along the tunnel toward the light.

The shadowy people standing in the alcoves along the walls of the tunnel blurred past her. She could hear their soft rustlings, faint murmuring voices. Sounds of approval. While she seemed to travel with blinding speed, the tunnel kept lengthening ahead of her so she gained very slowly.

Joana!

A voice calling her name. It came not from the seated figure at the end of the tunnel, and not from the dimly seen people along the walls. From where?

Joana!

There it was again. A voice she knew from the world she had left behind. A familiar voice, filled now with agony and with love. Joana tried to make room for the voice in her mind. She willed herself to slow the headlong rush down the tunnel. The magnetic force drawing her toward the circle of light was more powerful than ever, but she fought against it.

Joana!

That voice, she could almost place it now. She wanted to hear it again.

Then, up ahead, the figure in the light beckoned to her more urgently. A new voice sounded in her mind, a voice of command.

Come, complete your journey. There is no turning back.

The force pulling on Joana from the far end of the tunnel was more powerful than anything in her experience. It was like an enormous vacuum sucking her toward the light. But now she did not feel the desire to join the figure there at the end. She fought against the magnetic pull, put the whole force of her will against it. Her movement along the dim tunnel slowed, then stopped. From the people along the walls came an agitated whispering. There were no more murmurs of friendship and approval. Waves of power surged toward her from the figure up ahead.

Joana, come back!

The voice of life. With an agonizing effort, Joana forced the essence of self that she had left to begin moving back.

At the far end of the tunnel the figure rose to a standing position — tall, powerful, commanding. All sense of benevolence was now gone. The figure was dark and menacing. Instead of the warm glow of light, it was surrounded by angry white flashes.

Bit by bit Joana willed herself back, away from the suddenly frightening thing that awaited her. From the shadows along the walls came an angry mutter. Spidery fingers reached out, clawing for her. At the far end the menacing figure seemed to grow until it filled the entire opening. Its voice thundered in her mind.

There is no going back! You are one of us!

Wordlessly she cried out her reply.

No! I do not belong here! It is not my time!

Joana!

Again the familiar voice calling her back. The voice of life. It gave her strength to resist the terrible power that was trying to draw her on to the unknown.

The rage of the people who lined the tunnel swept over her like

a physical force. Joana fought back, and her will grew stronger. She retreated ever faster back the way she had come. Back toward life.

The terrible voice boomed again.

You cannot go back now! You have come too far. You can never return!

I can! Joana cried inside herself. *I will! I am going to live!*

Like a scorching desert wind the voice roared around her and through her.

We will come for you. We will walk. We will bring you back.

No! I can beat you!

In the great echoing tunnel the terrible voice thundered a last time.

You may win once, not likely twice, most rarely thrice, and four times — never! You must return by the Eve of St. John.

With a suddenness that shocked her, the tunnel vanished, and with it the watchers along the walls, the distant circle of light, and the terrifying figure who waited at the end.

There was only darkness at first, then a pinpoint of light that expanded into a blazing white that filled her head. She tried to speak, but managed only a wracking cough. Her chest heaved and she felt the pain.

Joana was alive.

Chapter 3

Somebody finally shut off the record player to kill the blaring disco sound. The young people gathered quietly around the still form of Joana Raitt at the side of the swimming pool. The colored lights still gave a jarring look of gaiety to the apartment recreation deck.

One of the girls who lived in the apartment held Joana's head in her lap. She braced it with her hands to keep it from rolling from side to side. Glen Early was on his knees beside her. Repeatedly he bent forward and put his mouth over Joana's to force his breath into her lungs, trying to give her life. Then he would raise up and count slowly to five while the air sighed back out of Joana's mouth along with a trickle of water from the pool. She was pale and cold, and there was no sign she would breathe on her own.

Joana, come back! Glen cried in his mind. He could not let this unthinkable thing happen. Breathe into her mouth, count five, breathe, count five. He would keep it up as long as he had breath of his own to give her. Breathe, count five, breathe. Glen was blind and deaf to everything going on around him. His whole being was focused on the pale form lying there on the grass.

Somehow, without Glen really being aware of it, this girl had come to be a vital part of his life. The mundane things that happened to him every day on his job were transformed into amusing adventures merely by the telling of them to Joana. The pleasures of his life were so much richer shared with Joana. He could not lose her now. He would not allow it to happen.

As Glen worked on, the people around him talked in short, excited bursts.

“Did anybody call an ambulance?”

“The paramedics are coming.”

“I don’t know what good they can do.”

“Isn’t anybody here a doctor?”

“There’s one living in the apartment.”

“That’s right, Dr. Hovde.”

“What unit is he in?”

“Number 12. It’s over on the other side by the tennis courts.”

“Come on, let’s go get him if he’s in.”

• • •

On the far side of the apartment complex, away from the swimming pool and the party deck, Dr. Warren Hovde heard the thump of the disco music suddenly stop. He pulled out a thin gold pocket watch and consulted the delicate hands. It was only a little after ten, much too early for a Marina Village party to shut down, even a mid-week party like this one.

Maybe they blew out an amplifier, the doctor thought hopefully. Whatever the cause, he leaned back to savor the relative quiet while it lasted.

Warren Hovde was fifty-five, which made him one of the senior residents of the Marina Village complex. He wore Brooks Brothers suits in the daytime and he liked classical music, two peculiarities that did not fit in with the local life style. But it was not for the life style that Dr. Hovde chose his furnished one-bedroom unit in the Village. He had taken it because it was convenient to his Santa Monica office and the hospital in West Los Angeles where he put in two afternoons a week. His attorney had found it for him last month when he and Marge decided on the divorce.

He missed the spacious ranch bungalow in Encino, but that would go to Marge, of course, along with the furniture. Also the Mercedes, both the kids, and O’Hara, the Irish setter. Warren came

out with the VW Rabbit, his record collection, and an apartment on the Marina where everybody but him seemed to be engaged in a perpetual party.

Warren Hovde had had his fill of parties in Encino. There the whole purpose seemed to be to get drunk enough to get it on with somebody else's wife. Since Warren only wanted to get it on with his own wife, he was considered an old bore. At the Marina Village he was considered merely old.

Lord, was he really middle-aged? He didn't feel middle-aged. Wasn't it just the other day he had turned thirty and could dance all the steps of the cha-cha like an expert until the bars closed? Where the hell did the years go, anyway?

Dr. Hovde sighed and pushed the melancholy thoughts to the bottom of his mind. From a rack on the floor he selected a Mozart record that always made him feel better. He set it gently on the turntable, being careful not to fingerprint the grooves, the way Marge had taught him.

He settled back on the vinyl sofa and put his feet up on the Formica coffee table and let the astringent harmonies of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* cleanse his mind.

Someone rapped urgently on the sliding glass door that opened out onto the tennis courts. The courts were uncommonly empty tonight, with the party going on around by the pool. Warren swung his feet reluctantly to the floor as the rapping continued.

A voice called from outside. "Dr. Hovde, are you home? There's been an accident."

Oh, Lord, he thought, not another OD. At a party last week one of the guests arrived freaked out on angel dust and tried determinedly to put his head through a cinder-block wall. It took three strong young men to hold him down while Dr. Hovde pumped a tranquilizer into him. Last he heard, the kid was in a private sanitarium, still blasted out of his skull. Fortunately, the parties

here ran to booze and grass, and maybe a little coke.

Dr. Hovde slid open the glass door. Outside stood a young man and woman, their faces tight and anxious.

"It's a girl, doctor," the young man said. "She was in the pool. She looks drowned."

"What's been done for her?"

"Her boyfriend is giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation."

"All right, let's go." The doctor took his compact emergency case from the end table where he kept it and hurried out, the strains of Mozart fading behind him.

He followed the young people at a jog around the building and into the courtyard where the recreation deck and pool were located. A cluster of people stood on the strip of grass beside the pool.

"Here's the doctor," called the young man. "Let him through."

The people gave way and Dr. Hovde saw the still form of the girl lying on the grass. Another girl held her head while a young man the doctor recognized as Glen Early breathed into her mouth. He looked up dazedly as the doctor came through the crowd.

"Keep it up," Hovde said, and Glen picked up the resuscitation without missing a count.

Hovde took hold of the girl's icy wrist and felt for a pulse. He could find none. He peeled back an eyelid and grimaced when he saw the dilated pupil. The girl's skin was unnaturally white. The doctor feared he was too late.

He snapped open the case and filled a hypodermic syringe from a vial of digitalis. Sometimes a massive shot directly into the heart muscle could get things started again. From the looks of the girl, it was not going to work this time, but he was a doctor, and the people expected him to do *something*.

The girl coughed.

Dr. Hovde knelt with the hypodermic syringe in his hand and stared at her unbelievingly.

Glen Early pulled his head back from hers and spat out pool water and phlegm. The girl rolled her head to one side and coughed again and again. Water sprayed from her lungs. The girl who had been holding her head began to cry.

Glen Early buried his face in his hands. “Joana,” he cried, “Ah, Joana!”

Dr. Hovde snapped back to his senses. “Get her inside,” he said. “Wrap her in blankets to keep her warm.”

“We can take her into my place,” said Glen. “I’m right over there.”

Three of the young men made a cradle of their arms and gently carried the girl across the recreation deck to Glen Early’s apartment. Dr. Hovde picked up his bag and followed slowly. His mind clicked like a computer, searching for a medical explanation for what he had just seen.

• • •

For Joana the fragments of sound coalesced slowly into voices. Real voices this time, not words being spoken inside her head the way it was in the other place. Gradually she could make out what was being said.

Glen: “Is she going to be all right?”

An older man: “She seems to be coming around surprisingly fast. Her pulse is weak but steady, and her temperature is climbing back up to normal.”

Peter Landau: “Do you think there’ll be any … brain damage?”

Oh, nice thought. Thank you very much, Peter.

The older man: “It’s hard to say. It depends on how long the oxygen supply to her brain was cut off.”

Glen: “It couldn’t have been more than two or three minutes.”

The older man: “Let’s hope not. Five minutes is usually the critical period.”

Joana opened her eyes and her vision cleared. She was lying on a sofa, the familiar sofa in Glen's apartment where they had sat so often watching television and drinking wine, and sometimes making love while the late movie flickered on unwatched.

A semicircle of faces looked down on her. She saw Glen first, his light hair in a tangle across his brow, his eyes full of relief. And there was Peter Landau watching her curiously. Looking for the first sign of brain damage, no doubt. Standing beside the sofa was a professional-looking man with steel-gray hair and a nice tan. Joana tried to reach out for Glen, but she was cocooned in blankets and could not move her arms.

"How do you feel?" asked the gray-haired man.

"All right, I think. Who are you?"

"My name's Warren Hovde. I'm a doctor."

"Hi, Doctor. My head hurts."

"I shouldn't wonder." The doctor took a silver penlight out of a leather case and shone it into her pupils, one after the other. He nodded, satisfied.

"Will she have to go to the hospital?" Glen asked.

The doctor placed a hand on her forehead. The hand was dry and firm, and smelled faintly of soap. "I don't think so," he said. "Keep her warm and quiet tonight, and tomorrow she ought to see her own doctor for a thorough checkup."

"I'm here," Joana said. "You don't have to talk around me."

"I'm sorry." Dr. Hovde smiled. "Would you like me to repeat that?"

"No need."

"The paramedics are here," someone called from the far side of the room.

"I'll talk to them," Glen said. He gave Joana's hand a squeeze and made his way to the door. Joana turned her head and saw him talking to two young men with short haircuts and blue uniforms.

Glen gestured toward Joana on the couch. She gave them a smile, and everybody seemed happy and relieved.

"Dr. Hovde," Joana said.

"Yes?"

"I don't have a doctor of my own. Could I come to you for the checkup?"

"If you like." The doctor fished through his wallet for a card. "Call my office before you come in. I'll tell my girl to be expecting you. It will have to be in the morning — tomorrow's my afternoon in Emergency at West L.A. Receiving."

Joana took the card. "I'll call early."

Some of the people in the crowded room started to move off. The voices picked up to a more normal conversational level.

"Is there any beer left?" somebody asked.

"There's a whole tub hasn't been touched."

"Well, let's go. Get the music started again. It's early."

Several of the people stopped by the sofa to say a few words to Glen and smile at Joana, and soon the apartment was empty except for the two of them and Dr. Hovde.

The doctor gave her a small plastic vial of pills. "This is a mild sedative. If you have any trouble sleeping tonight, take two of them. Other than that, keep warm and take it easy."

"I intend to," she said.

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

Glen walked Dr. Hovde to the door and saw him out. He drew the draperies across the broad windows and came back to the sofa. He sat down on the edge of the cushion, looking intently at Joana. She worked one of her arms free of the blanket to take his hand. His grip was strong and reassuring.

"Baby, baby," he said, "for a while there I really thought I had lost you."

"For a while there you *did*," she told him.

“Can I get you anything? Glass of wine? Coffee? Soup?”

“Hot soup sounds good. Something not too thick, if you’ve got it.”

“I’ll check.”

Glen went out to the kitchen. Joana readjusted the pillows and laid her head back. She closed her eyes and drew in a breath of clean, dry air. Her chest hurt a little, and there was still a faint headache, but nothing serious.

Joana thought back over what had happened to her. The panic of drowning, then floating out of her body and up somewhere above the pool, the flash scenes of her life, the powerful magnetic pull on her to go … somewhere. Then the tunnel, the shadowy forms along the walls, the pure white light at the end, and the figure — whoever or whatever it was — that sat in the circle of light. She remembered the overwhelming sense of peace and comfort she had experienced at first, and how very much she wanted to go to join the seated figure. There was the feeling of sailing at great speed along the tunnel, then suddenly the voice calling her back. It had been Glen’s voice, she knew that now. Once she had heard Glen’s voice and hesitated, everything changed. The figure in the light became cold and menacing, the shadow people along the walls reached out to prevent her from going back. But she had come back. She was here.

Joana knew that something very special had happened to her. It was no dream. Everything that had occurred was fresh and clear in her memory. Although her rational mind fought against acceptance, she knew in her heart what had happened. She had died. She had been dead for a little while, and then she had come back. She felt a golden, breathless sense of relief. It was like almost slipping over a cliff, then barely pulling back at the last instant. Only in this case Joana had actually gone over, and still she made it back. She should be the happiest, most grateful young woman in

the world. But there was a shadow across her happiness. The final thundering words of the thing in the tunnel still echoed in her brain.

You may win once, not likely twice, most rarely thrice, and four times — never! You must return by the Eve of St. John.

What did it mean? Why did the memory make her shiver with the cold here in Glen's cozy apartment?

Glen came out of the kitchen. "Did you say something?"

"No. I was just thinking."

"I put on a can of chicken gumbo, is that okay?"

"That's fine. Glen?"

"What, baby?"

"What is the Eve of St. John?"

"I don't know. Title of a play?"

"No, that's *The Eve of St. Mark*."

"Then you've got me. Is it important?"

"It might be. Come here and sit by me for a minute."

He walked over and sat down on the edge of the sofa. He leaned down to brush her forehead with his lips.

"You know, you brought me back, Glen."

He laughed self-consciously. "That's the first time I ever tried to give somebody mouth-to-mouth. I wasn't even sure I was doing it right. I'm just glad it wasn't some dude with a beard."

Joana did not smile. "I don't mean only that," she said. "You called me back."

"Called you?"

"Glen, we know each other pretty well, but there are some important things we've never talked about."

"like what?"

"like death."

Glen looked uncomfortable. "It really doesn't make for a fun conversation."

“We can’t just talk fun all the time.”

“Of course not. What about it? Death.”

“What do you think happens? Afterward, I mean.”

“Afterward? The family and friends gather around and say nice things about you. Then they put you in the ground. Or they cremate you.”

“I don’t mean the body,” she said. “I mean what happens to your spirit? Your … soul, or whatever the spark is that makes us alive?”

“God, Joana, I don’t know, I’m an engineer and an agnostic. Do you really feel like having a philosophical discussion right now?”

“It’s important to me.”

“All right, then. Wait a minute, though, I think the soup is boiling. And you’d better get out of that wet swimsuit. I’ll bring you a robe.”

Joana sat up and freed herself from the blankets. “I’ll get it. I know where it is.”

“Sure you’re steady enough to walk?”

“I’m steady enough for a lot of things. You go tend to the soup.”

Joana went into the bathroom and peeled off the new blue maillot that nobody even got a chance to admire. She hung it over the shower head. With Glen’s big furry towel she rubbed her skin to a pink glow, then put on the plaid Pendleton robe he kept hanging on the back of the bathroom door. When she went back into the living room, Glen had a bowl of hot soup waiting on the coffee table, and next to it a dish of crackers.

Joana found the canned gumbo delicious. Her tongue discovered new subtleties in the taste. She felt the way she sometimes did after smoking grass, and all her perceptions were especially acute.

When she finished the soup Glen poured them each a glass of

brandy. They sat close together on the sofa and listened to the laughter and party sounds outside. Joana felt pleasantly warm and fuzzy. She did not bring death into the conversation again.

Glen kissed her. He slipped a hand inside the robe and gently squeezed her breast. Joana responded eagerly. When at last they broke apart Glen looked at her with some surprise.

“For a lady who nearly drowned a couple of hours ago, you sure can kiss. Are you feeling well enough to follow up?”

“Take me to bed and find out,” Joana said.

Glen picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.

Very few things, Joana decided, made a woman feel sexier than being carried to bed. Some deeply repressed rape fantasy, she guessed.

They made love. Joana explored Glen’s body as though she were just discovering it. In a way she was, as all of her senses remained extraordinarily keen. Her reactions to the textures, the smells, the tastes of him were stronger than ever before. She savored his touch on her body as though it were the very first time.

When she held Glen inside her it felt so ineffably good she wanted it never to end. When at last the climax came it was a series of soft explosions that wracked her body and left her limp and wrung out and indecently satisfied. At that moment she felt so completely close to Glen that she wanted to tell him of the miraculous thing that had happened to her tonight. She wanted to tell him every one of the details while they were still etched in her mind. But she was just too sleepy. She would tell him in the morning.

Joana closed her eyes and sank at once into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 4

Joana awoke promptly at seven-fifteen. It was her regular waking-up time on a weekday when she had to go to work. It took her a moment to recognize where she was — in Glen Early's king-size bed at the Marina Village. She stretched luxuriously and buried her face in the indentation left by Glen's head in the other pillow. She inhaled the scent of English Leather. Nice.

She rolled over onto her back and smelled that most delightful of morning aromas — frying bacon and coffee. Faint sounds coming from the kitchen told her Glen was up and making breakfast. Joana stretched again and smiled, feeling content and well loved. Then abruptly her smile fell away. For the first minute after waking she had forgotten the near-tragedy in the swimming pool last night, and the terrible aftermath. Now the whole experience came rushing back into her consciousness.

Glen appeared at the bedroom door. "Hi. You awake?"

"What?"

"I asked if you were awake."

"Oh. Sure. Is that breakfast I smell?"

"It is. Hungry?"

"Starved."

He came over and sat on the bed. Joana rolled onto her side to face him. He stroked her lean hip through the sheet.

"How do you feel, kid?"

"Fine," she said.

"Really?"

"Really. Good as new."

He looked down at her with tender, serious eyes. “That was a close one last night.”

“Closer than you know,” she said.

“Do you want me to stay with you today?”

“No, you go on to work. I think I’ll call my office, though, and take the day off.”

“Good idea. Stay here if you want to.”

“Thanks, but I think I’d like to get out into the fresh air.” She hesitated. “Glen?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to talk about what happened to me last night.”

“What’s to talk about? You went swimming too soon after eating. You got a cramp.”

“No, I mean after that.”

Glen’s eyes, usually so direct, evaded hers. He said, “I’d better see about breakfast. Will you be ready in ten minutes?”

She nodded. He kissed her cheek and left the bedroom.

Joana lay for a moment looking at the empty doorway. She knew Glen was uneasy about things that could not be explained with formulas and computers, but she badly wanted to talk about her experience. The whole thing was as clear in her mind this morning as though it had happened five minutes ago. It was definitely no dream.

She took a quick shower and dressed in the clothes she had worn to the party last night. Someone must have brought them in from poolside. She went out and joined Glen at the breakfast bar that separated his small kitchen from the even smaller dining area. He had prepared scrambled eggs, bacon, toasted muffins, orange juice, and coffee. It was the only meal Glen knew how to cook, but he cooked it beautifully.

They ate quietly while an all-news radio station muttered about crises, real and pending. When they finished Joana took a second

cup of coffee and lit a cigarette. Glen frowned slightly. He would have liked her to quit smoking, but he never nagged her about it, for which Joana was grateful.

He was saying something about the crowd at the party last night, but Joana found she could not concentrate on his words. At the first pause she broke in.

"Last night," she said, "after my leg cramped in the pool and I couldn't get out, I was actually out of my body for a while."

"Don't you mean out of your head?"

"No, I mean my body. I could actually look down and see it there in the pool, under the water."

Glen looked at his watch.

"I could see you and all the other people, and I could hear what you were saying. It was like I was floating there in the air, just suspended."

"Weird," said Glen. "Do you want more coffee?"

"No, I want to talk."

"What about?"

"About this, for Christ's sake, about what happened to me."

"You mean when you felt like you were floating in the air over the pool?"

"Not *felt like*, Glen, I *was* floating there."

"Okay, you were floating."

"But it was the things that happened after that that really bother me."

"Look, you don't have to talk about it now. You're probably still pretty upset."

"Glen, I *want* to talk about it. I want to try to understand it, and I can't do that if I don't start by talking it out."

He put his hand on the back of her neck, up under the hair, and massaged her muscles there. "You had a really rough experience last night. A lot of crazy things went through your mind. It would

happen to anybody."

"Damn it, Glen, this is not a crazy imagining, I'm telling you this *happened*." She drew a breath and forced herself to speak in a gentler tone. "I was actually … in another place."

"Look, why don't you just spend today taking it easy. We'll talk about it later."

"You don't want to talk about it at all, do you?"

"It's not that. I just think you're getting altogether too serious about this business of floating outside your body, or whatever it is."

"Are you afraid to hear about it because it might not fit into your tidy little compartmentalized world?"

"I'm not afraid to hear anything," he said, pronouncing his words carefully. "It is time now for me to go to work, and if you still want to, we can talk about it later."

"Fine," Joana said, feeling that it was not fine at all.

Glen got up and began to stack the breakfast dishes in the sink.

"I'll take care of them," Joana said. "You go on to work. I'll lock up when I leave."

"Thanks." Glen went out to the other room and came back in a minute wearing a necktie and jacket. "I'll call you later."

"Fine."

He kissed her briefly and went out.

Joana finished washing and putting away the dishes. She made the bed, then sat down to call her office. She'd had a little accident last night, she said, without going into detail. She was all right today, but still a little shaky, and thought it would be best if she didn't come in. Her boss, advertising manager for a chain of department stores, was sympathetic. Take care of yourself, he told her, and we'll see you tomorrow.

Joana hung up the phone and sat for a moment in Glen's living room collecting her thoughts. She had no idea of what to do with herself today. She truly did not feel like going to work, yet she did

not want to be alone. The experience of last night in the shadowy tunnel was too much with her. She needed desperately to talk to someone about it.

Dr. Hovde. He had asked her to call this morning to arrange for a checkup. Physically she felt no need for a doctor, but he might have some understanding of what had happened to her. She found the card he had given her and dialed the number on Glen's phone. When a woman answered at the other end, she gave her name.

"Oh, yes, Miss Raitt, Doctor said you might call. He can take you at nine-thirty, if that's convenient."

"Yes, I can make that."

Joana hung up and again checked the address on the card. Dr. Hovde's office in Santa Monica was just fifteen minutes away from the Marina. Joana would have liked to go home first and change clothes, but there would not be time.

She idled away thirty minutes leafing through Glen's magazines. They ran to technical journals and business publications, which held little interest for her. Glen was a dear, loving man, but he did not have a whole lot of imagination.

She gave her face a last, unnecessary touch-up in the bathroom and let herself out of the apartment, locking the door behind her.

The sky was a high silver-gray overcast, typical for a June morning in southern California. The recreation deck was deserted except for a maintenance man cleaning up the debris of last night's party. The swimming pool lay quietly blue and innocent. Nothing about it suggested the terror Joana had felt when the cramp seized her and she sank helplessly into the chlorinated depths. She kept well away from the edge of the pool as she headed for the parking lot.

Only a few cars remained in the portion of the lot reserved for visitors to the Marina Village. Joana stopped for a moment to admire a midnight-blue Corvette, then got out her keys and inserted

them in the door of her little orange Datsun.

"Hi."

She turned at the sound of a man's voice behind her. It was Peter Landau, the Disco King and specialist on brain damage.

"Hello," she said coolly.

"How you feeling today?"

"Fine." She saw his genuine concern, and softened a little. "I'm a little shaky, but there seem to be no serious aftereffects."

"That's good. You gave us all quite a scare last night."

"I'll bet. Gave myself quite a scare too."

Peter came closer. "Something happened to you last night, didn't it? Something strange."

Joana looked at him closely. His deep brown eyes were gentle, and seemed to care.

"Yes," she said. "How did you know?"

"It was some of the things you said when we carried you into the apartment, before you were fully conscious."

"Was anyone else listening?"

"I guess they thought you were delirious."

"And you don't?"

"No. What does your friend think?"

"I don't know. He doesn't want to talk about it."

"I will, if you want to."

"Oh?"

Peter took a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

Joana recalled that she'd seen the card before, when Peter had given her one at the party. Now she read aloud, "*Peter Landau, Psychic Counseling*. What's that?"

"A little of everything. Self-help, paranormal psychology, E.S.P."

"Dance lessons?" Joana said, teasing him.

"That's only a sideline."

She examined the card again. "You don't do astrology, by any chance?"

"As a matter of fact, I do make charts for some of my clients. I also read the Tarot and I *Ching*."

"That's swell, but I don't think any of that stuff relates to what happened to me."

"Don't be too sure. If you feel like talking about it, give me a call."

"Thanks," Joana said, "I'll keep it in mind."

"Or, if you're interested in those dance lessons …"

Joana laughed and shook her head.

Peter gave her a parting salute, crossed the lot, and got into the Corvette.

Joana dropped the card into her bag. She smiled. *Psychic Counseling*. It sounded like a con game to her. Still, it was nice to get a little sympathy from somebody after Glen's no-nonsense reaction this morning.

The Corvette pulled out of the parking lot and turned down Admiralty Way, exhausts burbling. Joana started the Datsun and drove out behind the 'Vette.

Both cars took the Marina Freeway to the San Diego and headed north. There the Corvette put on a burst of speed and was soon lost to Joana's sight in the traffic up ahead.

She turned off the freeway at Santa Monica Boulevard and drove to the address of Dr. Hovde's office. It was a big Victorian house that had originally been a private dwelling but now housed the medical offices of Dr. Warren Hovde and a partner.

Joana walked into the high-ceilinged waiting room. The furniture was heavy and dark — no pastel plastics here. The oil paintings on the walls were original landscapes. A middle-aged receptionist looked up and smiled. Joana gave her name, and the

receptionist picked up a phone to speak to the doctor somewhere in the back of the house.

"It will just be a few minutes," she said.

Joana took a seat and shuffled through copies of *Sunset* and *Arizona Highways* until she found a *National Geographic*. She had just started on an article about the Great Barrier Reef when the receptionist said, "You may go in now, Miss Raitt. Room number two."

Joana laid the magazine back with the others on a marble-topped table and walked down a hallway to the examination room with a metal number 2 screwed to the door. She entered the small room and stood around uncomfortably for a minute, looking at the sparse white-enameled furnishings. Then Dr. Hovde came in looking fresh and cheerful.

In his starched white coat, and with the earpieces of a stethoscope protruding from a pocket, he looked, Joana thought, as though he had just come from filming a commercial. His short gray hair was brushed neatly into place, his face glowed with a healthy golf-course tan. His eyes, behind the gold-rimmed glasses, were warm and professional, without presuming too much intimacy.

"Well, Joana," he said, taking her hand, "you certainly don't look any the worse for wear this morning. How are you feeling?"

"All right. No problems."

"How is your appetite?"

"Good. I ate a big breakfast."

"Mm-hmm. We'll just run a few routine tests, but you look healthy as a horse to me."

Without asking her to undress, Dr. Hovde checked her temperature, pulse, blood pressure, pupil reactions, and reflexes. As he worked he kept up a gentle stream of conversation about his boy up at Stanford and his girl who was graduating from high school this month. Joana was relaxed and comfortable throughout the

examination.

"Just as I thought," the doctor said, finishing up with the rubber mallet to test her knee jerk.

"What's that?"

"You're in A-1 physical shape. We could go into a more extensive checkup if you want to, but frankly I don't see any reason for it."

"That's good enough for me," Joana said. She hesitated a moment, then made a decision. "There *is* something I'd like to talk to you about."

"Yes?"

"Last night, when I went under in the pool and couldn't get anybody's attention, after I, well, blacked out, I had a really weird experience."

Dr. Hovde took a chair facing her. "Tell me about it."

Struggling to keep her tone level and unemotional, Joana recounted the whole experience, from the feeling of leaving her body and floating somewhere above the scene to her struggle to return from the tunnel of shadows and the rage she felt directed at her as she finally made good her escape.

Dr. Hovde sat quietly while Joana talked. His eyes never left her face.

"Well … that's it," she said at last, feeling somehow that she had not done a good job in the telling.

"I see. Well, I wouldn't worry about it too much if I were you," said the doctor. "It's not an uncommon experience."

"It's not?"

"Not at all. In the case of a sudden shock like an accident or a fire or, in your case, a near-drowning, the mind can play some mighty strange tricks."

"I don't think you understand me, Doctor. What I'm saying is that it wasn't a near-drowning last night, it was real. I died in that

swimming pool. For a period of time, I have no idea how long, since time had no meaning where I was, I was really dead. I crossed over, then somehow made it back."

"Yes, I can see how you might believe that. There have been a number of books recently about the experiences of people brought back from the so-called brink of death. Have you read any of them?"

"No."

"You've heard of the books, perhaps?"

"Maybe I have." Joana began to feel irritated at the doctor's professional detachment. "Anyway, I don't see what those books have to do with me."

"Sometimes an idea or an impression planted in the subconscious can be blown to the surface, so to speak, at a time of great stress."

"I didn't know you were a psychiatrist," Joana said coolly.

Dr. Hovde chuckled. "I'm not, of course, just an old-fashioned G.P. Still, I can pull out a little elementary Freud now and then if the occasion calls for it. If you want my strictly medical opinion of what caused this 'weird experience' of yours, I would call it anoxic hallucination, sensory distortions caused by temporary lack of oxygen delivered to the brain."

"Do you think that's it?"

"What else could it be?"

"I — I don't know. I have a feeling it's not over."

Dr. Hovde moved to a desk and scribbled on a prescription pad. "I can understand how this would cause you some anxiety, so I'll prescribe a tranquilizer for you. If you still feel edgy, take one every four hours for a couple of days. After that you shouldn't need them."

"All right," Joana said. She took the slip of paper, folded it, and tucked it into her bag. The doctor was so logical and reasonable in

his explanation, she began to wonder if perhaps he was right. After all, the oxygen had been cut off from her brain for a short period, and that could have triggered the whole outlandish experience.

But she did not think so.

Dr. Hovde walked her back down the hallway to the waiting room. “Just take it easy the rest of the day,” he said. “Do something you enjoy. How’s that for doctor’s orders? I wish I could give them to myself, but this is my afternoon in the emergency ward.”

“Is that so?” Joana said politely. Her thoughts were elsewhere.

“Yes, I try to put in one or two half-days a week,” the doctor said. “With a practice like mine you can get caught up in treating strep infections and flu, and forget how to deal with some of the more violent things that can happen to the human body.”

“I suppose so,” Joana said.

“Take care of yourself now, and if there’s any problem, give me a call.”

“I will.”

Joana left the building and walked up the street to her car. The overcast was rapidly burning away, and it looked like it was going to be a lovely day.

She was not ready to go home, so decided she would stop in Westwood to get her prescription filled and do some window-shopping. The thought cheered her, and she paid no attention when a Chevy station wagon pulled out into the street behind her and followed her in on Santa Monica Boulevard.

Chapter 5

The streets of Westwood thronged, as usual, with shoppers, strollers, college students, and tourists. And as usual, there was not a parking place to be seen anywhere. Joana sometimes wondered where all the cars came from that lined both sides of the streets from Wilshire to Le Conte. There never seemed to be anyone parking or leaving, they were always just … there. However, the sun was fully out now and a gentle breeze blew in from the ocean, and Joana did not mind having to walk a few blocks.

For several minutes she drove back and forth on the oddly angled streets, making her way north block by block. It was several blocks up Hilgard, along the eastern edge of the UCLA campus, that she finally found an available parking place. In the heavy traffic Joana paid no attention to the station wagon that stayed doggedly behind her.

She backed the Datsun into the space on Hilgard and dropped a quarter into the parking meter. Several cars behind her, the station wagon double-parked and sat there with the engine idling. Joana glanced back at the driver, a white-faced woman with a grim mouth and an odd dusty look to her eyes. Feeling uncomfortable, Joana turned away. Something about the woman seemed to trigger a memory, an unpleasant memory. Joana put the thought out of her mind and walked down the street toward Le Conte. Bullock's was there, just across the street from the campus. Joana decided to save the big department store for last, checking out the smaller specialty shops of Westwood first.

On her right the green lawn of the campus sloped up and away.

Students lounged about on the grass. Some dozed, some read books, and some were couples with eyes only for each other. Joana, barely four years out of college herself, marveled at how young they looked. How young and unmarked by the world.

Behind her the station wagon eased forward. The woman at the wheel paid no attention to the exasperated drivers behind her and crawled along the line of parked cars, keeping pace with Joana.

At Le Conte Joana turned right, staying alongside the campus, and stopped for the traffic light, waiting to cross at Tiverton. Twenty yards up the street the station wagon stopped too and waited.

The red don't walk light blinked off and the white walk came on. Joana started across the street.

To her left an automobile engine revved suddenly. Tires shrieked on the asphalt. There were shouts of warning from the other pedestrians. A little girl screamed.

For an instant Joana was frozen in the crosswalk, a third of the way across the street. She saw the station wagon rushing toward her like some maddened beast. Through the windshield she could see the face of the woman at the wheel. It was a mask of mindless fury, the lips skinned back from yellowed teeth in a soundless snarl.

Someone clutched at Joana from behind and she snapped out of her trance. She sprang forward in a headlong leap, striking the pavement with her hands. She rolled over and over toward the far curb. A blast of wind buffeted her as the station wagon roared past her, inches away.

There was a metallic clang as the wagon caromed off a parked car and bounced up over the curb. It crossed the sidewalk and continued up onto the lawn, slowing down but still scattering pedestrians and students.

Dazed, her ears ringing, Joana sat up on the pavement. She was surrounded by people, many of them college students. They were

looking down at her with concern while they watched the station wagon roll slowly up the bank on the other side of the street. Everyone spoke at once.

"Are you hurt?"

"… ran right through the stop light …"

"… didn't even slow down …"

"… must be crazy …"

"… drunk …"

Joana rose shakily to her feet. Her hands were scraped where they had hit the pavement, but as far as she could tell, there were no other injuries. She turned with the others to watch as across the street the station wagon plowed heavily into a thicket of laurel and stalled. The engine died, and for a moment there was an unnatural silence over the scene.

The door of the station wagon swung open. Slowly the woman got out from behind the steering wheel. She was a short, unremarkable-looking woman, a trifle overweight and wearing a cotton print dress. Her gray hair was in disarray, she looked confused. The woman turned her head from side to side, as though searching for something, but her eyes were empty.

The people down in the street who had been watching her suddenly came to life. A crowd surged forward and up the embankment toward the woman. As they converged on her, the woman crumpled to the ground like a marionette with the strings cut.

Down on the street a black-and-white police car pulled into the block and jammed to a stop. Two young officers jumped out. One of them ran up the grassy slope toward the woman who lay beside the station wagon. The other listened briefly to a group of witnesses, then came over to Joana.

"Are you hurt, miss?"

"No. I scraped my hands a little when I jumped out of the way,

that's all."

"Those people say the vehicle appeared to head right for you and accelerate."

"I don't know, everything happened so fast. I didn't see anything until I was out in the crosswalk and all of a sudden the car was coming at me. I just had time to jump out of the way."

"I'll need your name and address for the report."

Joana fumbled out her driver's license and handed it to the young policeman. He made careful entries in a pocket-size notebook.

"Jimmy!"

The officer looked up at his partner called from across the street. He was kneeling there on the grass beside the woman.

"Yo?"

"Come over here."

The policeman called Jimmy returned Joana's license and closed the notebook. He slipped it into his shirt pocket and crossed the street. The people who were standing around moved after him in a group. Joana was carried along with them.

The two policemen stood together and talked in low, urgent voices. The crowd stayed back to give them a semicircle of space. The people gave their attention to the woman who lay face up on the ground. Several of them ventured closer.

"What's the matter with her?" somebody asked.

"She fainted."

"Fainted, hell. She's dead."

"She can't be. Her car didn't hit anything solid, just kind of mushed into the hedge."

"I don't care, man, the woman's dead. Just take a look."

Joana turned away and started to walk back down the embankment toward the street. The policeman who had talked to her followed and caught up with her.

“Excuse me, Miss …” He consulted his notebook. Miss Raitt.”

“Yes?”

“Did you get a good look at the woman who was driving the station wagon?”

“Not really, it all happened so quickly.”

“Would you mind taking a look at her now?”

“Is it necessary?”

“Some of the witnesses say she seemed to aim her car at you deliberately. We have to know if you recognize her.”

“All right.”

Joana let herself be led back to where the woman lay on the grassy slope. The people standing around made way for her. The woman’s eyes were closed now, the expression on her face almost serene in contrast to the mask of ferocity Joana had glimpsed as the car bore down on her. Were it not for the dead gray pallor of her face, the woman could have been sleeping.

“Know her?” the policeman asked.

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Can I go now?”

The policeman glanced over at his partner, who was taking down the names of witnesses. “Yes, you can go,” he said. “If there’s an inquest you may be called upon to testify.”

Joana nodded and started again for the street. She felt numb, and strangely detached from the recent violent events. When she reached the sidewalk, instead of heading back toward her car, she crossed the street to a drugstore and found a telephone booth. She searched for a moment through her bag, then pulled out the card she was looking for: *Peter Landau, Psychic Counseling.*

• • •

A Wednesday afternoon was generally one of the quieter

periods in the emergency ward of the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital. Later on, as the weather grew warmer, they would begin getting more seasonal action from the beach — the people who swallowed too much seawater or absorbed too much sun. But before the hot weather set in, there would be just the normal emergency-ward customers. They would get the usual number of children who had ingested some noxious substance found uncapped and unguarded under the sink. There would be a few dog bites, a housewife who sliced her finger along with the carrots, a broken bone, a sprain, a concussion, a coronary. A varied list, but routine, and spaced out nicely over the day. Fridays and Saturdays, business picked up. That was when they got the sick drunks, the bum-trippers, the torn-up traffic victims, the losers of fights, the mugging victims, and the gunshot wounds. On Friday and Saturday nights there was hardly ever a chance for a doctor on the emergency ward to slip away for a quiet cigarette, which was what Dr. Warren Hovde was doing on the bright June afternoon when Mrs. Yvonne Carlson was brought in.

One look at the woman's body told Dr. Hovde there was nothing he or anyone else could do for her. Nevertheless, he ran through the standard tests before marking her officially D.O.A. and sending the body down to the pathology lab in the basement.

Since he had the time to kill, Dr. Hovde took the police report on Mrs. Carlson, Caucasian, fifty-seven, back to the office cubicle to read while he treated himself to another cigarette. Dr. Hovde was careful never to smoke at his own office where one of his patients might see him. It would undermine the stern antismoking lectures he delivered regularly.

He leaned back in the wooden swivel chair, propped his feet on a pulled-out drawer, and began to read the formal police version of the accident in Westwood a little more than an hour earlier. Suddenly he sat forward when he recognized the name of Joana

Raitt in the report. He went back and started the report again, reading the whole thing through carefully.

When he had finished he carried the folder with him out to the ward. There he spoke to the young resident who was treating a roller-skater for a pair of abraded knees.

“Do you think you can manage without me for a few minutes?” Dr. Hovde said.

The resident looked around at the nearly empty ward. “Unless we get an earthquake.”

“I’ll be in the pathology lab.”

With the manila folder containing the accident report tucked under his arm, Dr. Hovde headed for the elevator.

Chapter 6

Peter Landau pursed his lips and gently touched the tips of his fingers together as he stared down at the zodiacal chart. It was a pose he had practiced before the mirror. He knew it made him look thoughtful. Every twenty seconds or so he would take up a felt-tip pen and scrawl bold, cryptic markings across the chart. Then he would revert to the thoughtful look, alternating it with a concerned frown and a slight nod of satisfaction.

The table on which he worked was round and heavy, covered with a fringed cloth of thick purple velvet. In the air floated a bare hint of incense, exotic spice. From hidden speakers came the muted sitar excursions of Ravi Shankar.

Across the table from Peter sat Mrs. Leonora Griesbeck. People guessed Mrs. Griesbeck's age at anything from forty-five to sixty-five, depending on what stage of cosmetic surgery she was in. Today the skin of her face was taut and still a little shiny from her most recent lift. The flesh of her neck, however, was etched with deep wrinkles, still visible under a heavy layer of makeup.

Mrs. Griesbeck watched Peter's face intently. Her own expression reflected his changing moods of optimism or doubt. She stared hard at the marks he made on the chart, as though she might decipher them through sheer concentration.

At length he made a final series of notations and slashed a heavy line across the page.

"Well, there we are," he said, sighing heavily to show the physical strain this cost him.

Mrs. Griesbeck leaned forward and peered at the chart. "How

does it look for me, Peter?"

"Beginning with today, that's … iffy." He flipped his hand back and forth to indicate the unsettled nature of the day. "Tomorrow you can look for some good news."

Mrs. Griesbeck brightened. "I'll bet it's about my plans for redoing the upstairs rooms."

"The weekend," Peter went on, "is generally favorable. Beware, though, of somebody who is going around telling lies about you."

"Who? Who's telling the lies about me? What are they saying?"

"I'm afraid the stars aren't that specific," Peter said.

"That's all right, I'll bet it's that Sheila Fess from across the street."

"Very likely," Peter said, consulting the chart.

"I knew it. Go on, tell me more."

"On Monday there's a strong indication of some physical ailment."

"My back," Mrs. Griesbeck confirmed. "It's been acting up again."

"Monday would be a good day to have somebody look at it."

"I'll call Dr. Isaacs first thing when I get home."

"Tuesday — ah — Tuesday you will have the opportunity to get even with someone who has wronged you."

"Sheila Fess," said Mrs. Griesbeck happily. "It will serve her right."

"No doubt. Wednesday will be a slightly down day. You should be on guard against some bad advice."

"I wonder what that will be?"

"It's hard to say. Just be careful."

"Don't worry, I will. What else?"

"After that it's Thursday, and you'll be back here again."

"So I will. Such a fast week."

"Time flies," Peter said sagely.

Mrs. Griesbeck sighed. “You’re such a comfort to me, Peter. You don’t know how much these sessions mean to me.”

Oh yes I do, he thought. I get a check from your accountant every week.

He said, “If, in my small way, I can smooth out the wrinkles in your life,” — oops, bad choice of words there — ”then I’m happy.”

“You are a dear.”

Peter busied himself clearing away the zodiacal chart and smoothing out the velvet tablecloth.

“Before I go,” said Mrs. Griesbeck, “how about a cup of that terrific herb tea? Nobody can make it as good as you do.”

Peter put on a sorrowful face. “I wish I could brew you one, Leonora, but my herb dealer is out of town this week. Visiting relatives in Singapore. Just my luck that yesterday I ran out of a couple of the most hard-to-get ingredients.”

Peter’s herb dealer was actually the Ralph’s Market at Sunset and La Brea, and the hard-to-get ingredient that Mrs. Griesbeck enjoyed so much was the hefty slug of vodka he always dropped into her cup.

“What a pity,” she said. “That cup of tea always sets off my day just right.”

“I’m sure I’ll have a new supply of herbs by next week,” he said.

Under normal circumstance Peter would have been happy to sit around another ten minutes or so with Mrs. Griesbeck while she knocked back a cup of vodka-laced tea. For the price she paid for these weekly sessions of bogus astrology, he could afford to indulge her. And a little tea-spiking was a good deal easier on him than some of the special services his other clients required. But Peter performed whatever was expected of him and never complained. What the hell, it kept him in Corvettes and Guccis.

Today, however, the circumstances were not quite normal. He

was anxious to speed Mrs. Griesbeck on her way back to the eighteen-room house in Beverly Hills, on the right side of Sunset, where she lived with her gynecologist husband and a Yorkshire terrier named Bitsy Face. Peter wanted to be all relaxed and ready when Joana Raitt arrived.

Joana's call this afternoon had caught him by surprise. Young, attractive, vigorous women like her were not the ones who usually sought out his services. He must have said the right thing to her this morning. He did get lucky sometimes, as with his guess that Joana had undergone a strange experience last night. The expression on her face told him he had hit home. Sometimes Peter wondered in an abstract way whether he might actually have some kind of extrasensory talent. He was, however, too sensible to entertain the thought for long.

He walked Mrs. Griesbeck to the door and stood on the porch smiling and waving as she negotiated the zigzag wooden steps leading down to the twisty canyon street where he lived. Her gray Mercedes waited at the foot of the steps. As Mrs. Griesbeck approached, her young driver sprang out to hold the back door for her. He looked up at Peter with hooded eyes. In a sense, they were in the same line of work.

The doors chunked solidly closed and the car rolled down the hill to Laurel Canyon Boulevard and headed back toward Hollywood.

Peter stood for a moment breathing in the afternoon air. The little house was perfect for his purposes. It was near enough to the action, yet isolated from the commercial hullabaloo of the boulevards. The outside was California rustic, with a suggestion of a Walt Disney witch's cottage — a kind of nonthreatening occult look. Peter had selected the furnishings with care. The colors and textures were sensual without being blatant about it. There were just enough touches of mystery — a crystal ball shrouded by a dark-blue cloth, a

zodiac clock, a Haitian voodoo mask — to suggest the supernatural without frightening off the clients.

He walked back inside. There was a quarter of an hour to kill before Joana was due. He snuffed the incense and turned on the exhaust fan over the big front window. Joana did not strike him as the incense type. Next he cut off the Far Eastern sitar music and replaced it with a tape of Laurindo Almeida playing some gentle guitar jazz. He listened for a moment and nodded his approval. Intimate, but not pushy.

He decided against setting out anything to drink. After all, she called him, let her establish the mood. He would play it by ear. Satisfied, Peter sank into his acrylic-fur Stratolounger and cranked it back to the full recline position. He closed his eyes and smiled. Life was good.

• • •

Some five years earlier, Peter Landau had not had it nearly so good. He was then one of several thousand good-looking young actors in Hollywood scrambling for the bare handful of parts that came up every season in television or the movies. He had been a great favorite in Kansas City community theaters, and was shocked to discover that doors did not spring open for him in Hollywood.

He was sharing a room then on Melrose Avenue near the Desilu Studios with two other young hopefuls. One was a would-be novelist whose work-in-progress always sounded like whoever he was reading at the time. By the time he had two-hundred pages of manuscript, the style ranged from Ross MacDonald to John Gregory Dunne, and included passages reminiscent of Philip Roth and Mark Twain. The other roommate was an aspiring standup comic. He felt he was being held back because he was a WASP, so to establish a more Jewish image he grew a beard and changed his name from Connor to Kravitz.

With acting jobs exceedingly scarce in those days, Peter spent much of his time scheming ways to eat cheap. One method he hit upon was to arrange to be invited to as many parties as possible, and there fill up on hors d'oeuvres. As an attractive, popular young man, he had no shortage of invitations, and this seemed to be as painless a way of eating free as was available. To be sure, a diet of Pringles, clam dip, salted almonds, Triscuits, caraway cheese, tortilla chips, marinated mushrooms, smoked oysters, and such was not high in nutrition, but Peter was strong and healthy, and it was better than nothing. It was also, he decided early on, better than dropping his pants for some of the town's important homosexuals, which was one popular route for aspiring young actors to take.

As a perpetual party guest, one who depended on repeat invitations, Peter found it expedient to develop a specialty. A *shtik*, his friend Kravitz would have called it in his bogus East Side accent. Peter's *shtik* was palm reading. He read a paperback book on the subject and decided that since it was all bullshit anyway, it would be no problem for him.

He was at his best with women in the forty-and-up bracket who enjoyed having their hands held by a handsome young man, no matter what kind of nonsense he gave them about life lines. Peter developed a smooth patter along the lines of "I see you've had a fascinating life, and you've overcome some really rough obstacles all on your own." Who was going to deny a piece of flattery like that? Sometimes he would take a flyer like "Within the next two weeks you should receive a large sum of money that you don't expect," or sympathetically, "I see in your hand the signs of a very recent tragedy." He managed to hit on these often enough so people began to seek him out especially for readings of their hands. To Peter's surprise, they pressed money on him for the service.

One of his early patrons, the wife of a hair-transplant tycoon, encouraged Peter to turn professional and to branch out from

palmistry to other occult fields, capitalizing fully on his “gift.” It was she who set him up in the house off Laurel Canyon. As for Peter’s part of the bargain, he had merely to provide a weekly Ouija-board contact with the lady’s late first husband and provide some bedtime activities that the current husband was unable or unwilling to manage.

Peter’s clientele came to him entirely through referrals. The tasteful business cards were the closest he came to advertising, and he had only had those printed because in Hollywood you had no identity unless you had a business card.

While his psychic-counseling business kept him hopping, Peter did not lack for social life. There was in Southern California an endless supply of nubile ladies like the blonde at the Marina Village, who were eager to jump into the sack with him. Their firm young bodies helped restore him for the sessions with his sagging clients, but sometimes he wished one of them might come up with something like an original thought.

Joana Raitt, now, she was something else. Peter had spotted her intelligence across the recreation deck almost at the same instant he spotted her tight white jeans. He had made his standard approach, and was not really surprised when she turned him down. Girls like Joana were not usually susceptible to his mellowed-out charm, but it was always worth a try. He had felt a genuine sense of loss when it appeared she had drowned in the pool, and had been glad to see her looking alive and alert in the parking lot this morning.

He concentrated, trying to remember exactly what Joana had said while they carried her from the pool to the apartment. Everyone else was shouting instructions and not paying any attention, but Peter, trotting alongside, had heard her clearly. It sounded crazy to him at the time, but when he mentioned it to her this morning it must have been important enough to get her over

here.

It was something about her not belonging somewhere, wanting to get away. It still didn't make any sense to Peter, but it was enough to open up a dialogue. And if he handled it right, there was no telling where it might lead.

Chapter 7

Joana drove up Laurel Canyon Boulevard to the twisting little street where Peter Landau lived, and turned off. She found his address painted on the curb about half a block up the street. She parked the Datsun and sat for a moment still holding the steering wheel. She had the sudden what-the-hell-am-I-doing-here feeling that came over her sometimes as she was about to board an airplane, or when she was walking into a strange party. At the airport she could always take a deep breath and remind herself where she was going and why, and at a party someone she knew usually would come out to greet her, but up here in the green canyon above Hollywood she could not shake the feeling of anxiety.

Yesterday — was it really less than twenty-four hours ago? — when she had met the self-absorbed Peter Landau, she would no more have imagined herself driving to his house the next day than she would have imagined, well, drowning in the swimming pool. Even this morning she had had no intention of ever seeing him again. However, after the unsatisfactory talk with Dr. Hovde and the near-miss with the wild driver in Westwood, she felt she absolutely had to tell her story to somebody, and Peter seemed to be the only one who might be willing to listen.

She got out of the car and looked up at the rustic cottage surrounded by a heavy growth of chaparral. She smiled at the rickety-looking flight of painted wooden stairs leading up to the porch. She disliked the word, but *funky* seemed the only way to describe the place. She started up the steps.

Peter Landau, smiling and sure of himself, answered her knock

at the door. He wore a pair of black leather jeans and a safari shirt open, of course, to the belt buckle. On a gold neck chain hung a little gold lion.

A Leo, thought Joana; I might have known.

"Welcome, welcome," he said, giving her a big white smile. "Come on in."

The room she entered was small and warm, filled with cushions and low, seductive furniture. A thick shag rug covered the floor. The lighting was indirect and subtle. Soft guitar music flowed from concealed speakers. Joana wondered whether coming here was a big mistake.

"Have any trouble finding the place?"

"No."

"Can I get you anything?"

Joana was about to decline, then thought what the hell. "What I'd really like is a martini."

"Hey, I'm sorry, but I don't have a drop of hard stuff in the place. How about a glass of wine?"

"That'll do."

Peter went out through a beaded curtain into another room. Joana wandered around looking at the books and pictures. The books were mostly occult or psychological, of the self-help variety. The pictures suggested the psychic, but with taste. Joana had the feeling they had been picked out by a woman.

The beaded curtain rattled and Peter reappeared carrying two glasses of pale wine, with a tall green bottle tucked under his arm. Joana took one of the glasses from him and tasted the wine. It was nicely chilled and had a clean, dry flavor. She nodded her approval and Peter beamed.

"I hope I'm not taking you away from your business," she said.

"Nope. I'm all yours" — he checked his wristwatch — "until four o'clock."

“This sounds silly,” she said, “but I’m not sure I know why I’m here.”

“You want to talk about what happened to you last night,” he suggested.

“Well, yes. That’s part of it, anyway.”

“Get comfortable, then, and let’s hear about it.”

He motioned her into a cozy love seat. Joana sat down carefully and was a little surprised when Peter took a chair facing her instead of sitting next to her. She was thankful, being in no mood to fend off a pass right now.

Pale-green draperies were drawn across the windows, allowing only a diffused afternoon light to come into the room. Combined with the gentle music, the purr of a fan somewhere, and Peter’s soft, reassuring voice, it had a hypnotic effect. Joana had to remind herself not to get too relaxed.

“What I had last night,” she said, plunging right in, “was the experience of being dead.”

She watched Peter for a reaction, but he only nodded encouragingly.

“I mean, as far as I’m concerned, there was a period of time there when I was actually dead.”

“I heard you,” Peter said quietly. “Go on.”

So, for the third time that day, she told the story. Once again she relived the emotions that had buffeted her when she left her body, when she was in the tunnel, and when she was trying to get out. When she finished, Joana felt physically exhausted.

Peter reached across the low table and refilled her wine glass. “What made you decide to call me this afternoon?”

“I guess it was the accident. Or almost-accident. I was nearly run down in a crosswalk in Westwood by some woman in a station wagon.”

“Do you think it had anything to do with the business last

night?"

"I don't know, probably not. It seems the woman had a heart attack or something. She dropped dead right after she got out of the car."

"Scary," he said.

"Yes, it was. And after that I just had to talk to somebody."

"Well, I'm glad you came. Now tell me, what can I do for you?"

"Do you mean in the way of psychic counseling?"

"Or any other way you have in mind." He caught her frown and grew serious. "Psychic counseling *is* what I do."

"I don't know what I wanted from you, Peter, I really don't. Just a sympathetic ear, I guess. I don't see that there's anything you or anybody else can do for me."

"Don't be too sure." He looked around the room speculatively. "Let me see, I don't think this is a job for the crystal. Ouija board?" He looked at her quickly, then shook his head. "No, we're not ready for the Ouija board. We don't have time to make a proper astrological chart for you." He rubbed his chin. "What would you say to a Tarot reading?"

"You mean fortune-telling cards? Like Gypsies?"

He held up his hands, palms outward. "No no no, not fortune-telling. Don't even say fortune-telling out loud. Fortune-telling is against the law. So are Gypsies, as far as I know. I am no Gypsy fortuneteller, I am a psychic counselor." He smiled at her. "For this no laws have yet been written."

"I don't think so," Joana said. "I wouldn't be a very good subject. I really don't believe in all that stuff."

"Until last night, did you believe you could be dead and come back?"

"You've got a point there."

"Anyway, it doesn't really matter if you believe or not. It won't affect the reading. Why not give it a try? What have you got to

lose?"

"Well … what the hell, why not?" Joana took out a cigarette and Peter reached across instantly to snap a flame for her from his lighter. "As you say, what have I got to lose?"

"That's the spirit." Peter stood up and walked over to a compact writing desk. From a drawer he took an oblong package wrapped in silk. He carefully unwrapped the silk kerchief and laid it aside. Joana saw the package was a thick pack of cards.

"You take good care of them," she said.

"Silk keeps out the discordant vibrations."

Joana searched his face for any sign that he was kidding, but found none. He came back and sat down beside her, spreading the cards out face up on the table in front of them.

Joana gazed down at the colorful picture cards. There were figures of humans, animals, and mythological creatures engaged in a variety of activities in different detailed settings. A few of them, kings and queens, vaguely resembled regular playing cards.

"First time you've seen a Tarot deck?" Peter asked.

"Yes, it is. Does each of these cards have a meaning of its own?"

"In a sense they do," Peter said smoothly, "but the symbolism is the important thing. That's the key to the Tarot. The meanings of the individual cards are different according to where they come up in the layout, whether they're upright or reversed, which cards come up around them, and most important, the vibes given off by the querent."

"Querent?" Joana repeated.

"That's you. I am the reader."

"If you say so." Joana picked out a card at random. It showed a tall, square-sided structure on the top of a mountain being struck by a bolt of lightning. Flames licked from the windows, and a man and woman, their faces contorted, plunged apparently to their deaths.

“What does this one mean? It looks ominous.”

Peter took the card from her hand. “This is The Tower,” he said. “And you’re right, this is usually bad news. Conflict, catastrophe, violent change, oppression. It all depends, though, on the total reading. With the right kind of vibes it could mean a new freedom of mind or body, though gained at great cost.”

“What you’re saying is it means just about what you want it to mean.”

He smiled, not at all offended. “Not really, but there is always room for interpretation. That’s what I’m here for.”

“All right,” she said, “let’s do it if we’re going to.”

“Right.” Peter moved the cards about on the table. “First we have to find one that will represent you.” He picked out a card showing a handsome crowned woman sitting on a throne, holding in her hands an elaborate jeweled chalice. “How would you like to be the Queen of Cups?”

“Why not.”

He placed the Queen of Cups face up in the center of the table. Then he scooped up the rest of the deck, squared it, and handed it to Joana. “Now you shuffle the cards.”

She took the deck from him. “How much do I shuffle?”

“Just until you feel comfortable about it. And while you shuffle, think about some question that you’d like the cards to answer.”

The Tarot cards were considerably larger than ordinary playing cards, and Joana found shuffling them an awkward task. She managed to mix them, however, and tried to come up with a question. She still thought this was a lot of foolishness, but as long as she was here, she might as well play the game.

The question. What should she ask the Tarot? There was only one thing of importance on her mind — her experience in that shadowy tunnel, and what came immediately before and after. The

feeling stayed with her that she was not out of trouble yet. She concentrated on the question: *How will this all end?*

She finished shuffling the cards and placed the deck on the table between them. “What now?”

“Cut the deck into three piles, from right to left, with your left hand.”

Joana followed his instructions, and felt a tingle of anticipation in spite of herself.

Peter took up the three piles in reverse order, using his left hand. “There are many different methods of laying out the Tarot,” he said, “but we’re going to use the one that’s most common — the ancient Keltic method.”

“If it was good enough for the ancient Kelts, it’s good enough for me,” Joana said. She was trying to lighten the mood, to lose the apprehensive feeling that this oversize deck of cards was actually going to tell her something.

Peter just smiled and peeled off the first card, which he placed over the Queen of Cups in the center of the table. As he laid the card he said, “This covers you.” The next card he placed horizontally across the first, saying, “This crosses you.” The next four cards he laid down in the form of a cross with the covered Queen of Cups at the center. As he carefully placed each card in its position, Peter spoke the ritual that went with it. “This is beneath you … This is behind you … This crowns you … This is before you.”

Next he laid down four cards in a vertical row to the right of the cross, beginning at the bottom. “These, now, will build up to give us the final answer to your question.”

He snapped down the tenth and last card. Joana flinched. The picture was of a skeleton in black armor mounted on a fiery-eyed white horse. Beneath the horse’s hooves lay a dead king. Before it a woman and a child were on their knees. The legend under the

picture: *DEATH*.

Joana reached out and tapped the card with a finger. “My God, what does this mean?”

Peter’s composure slipped a notch. “That? Oh, we’ll get to that. It doesn’t necessarily mean what it seems to.”

“I hope not,” Joana said.

Peter cleared his throat and slipped back into his professional manner. “Let us consider first this card, the one that covered your Queen of Cups. It represents the influences at work on you and the general atmosphere in which you ask the question. As you see, it is the Three of Swords. Here the swords are piercing a heart. Your heart. There are problems in your romantic life. A quarrel. Separation, perhaps.”

Joana looked at him quickly, remembering the chilly exchange she’d had with Glen this morning. She tried to recall if she had made some reference to that when she’d met Peter in the parking lot this morning. That was probably it. He was a perceptive man.

He pointed to the card at the right side of the cross — a stalwart young man in a winged helmet, a cup held firmly in his outstretched hand. “But now the good news. Here, in your very near future, we find a new romantic interest. A young man, sensitive, artistic. He will have a message for you. An invitation, perhaps.”

“Or a proposition?” Joana suggested.

“Possibly, possibly.” He went on in more general terms, telling her what each card represented — the forces opposing her, an influence just passing away, and so on. The things he read, or said he read, in the cards could generally fit her situation, but a clever man like Peter Landau could have deduced enough from what he already knew of her to build a fairly convincing story.

Still, as he talked on, telling about the cards that made up the cross, Joana could detect a faltering in his patter. She watched his

eyes and saw they kept straying to the top card in the row of four, the Death card.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

"Matter?" he said too quickly. "No. Well, maybe. I don't seem to be getting strong vibes from you. Maybe the Tarot wasn't a good choice. What sign did you say you were? Libra, I'll bet."

"I'm an Aries, but don't change the subject." She pointed down at the skeletal figure on horseback. "I want to know what this means."

"Without reading all the other positions and relating them to each other, it's impossible to — "

"Cut out the bullshit, Peter," she said. "Tell me what it means."

Peter cleared his throat again. "Well, this position, number ten in the Keltic layout, tells us what the final outcome will be. It is the sum of the information contained in all the other cards, and the ultimate answer to your question."

"Death?"

He tried a smile that did not come off. "When you come right down to it, isn't that the final outcome of everything, for all of us?"

Joana did not answer his wobbly smile. Her eyes returned to the card showing the deadly figure in the black armor.

Peter reached out suddenly and swept the cards into a pile. "Sometimes you just don't get a true reading," he said. "It happens all the time. Why don't we start over again?"

"No, thank you," Joana said.

"Well, look, how about another glass of wine? I'll put on another tape, something upbeat, and we can relax and rap for a while."

"I've really got to go," she said. "I haven't even been home yet to change my clothes."

She stood up, and Peter immediately got to his feet. "Can I see you again?" he said.

"What for?"

"What does a guy usually want to see a girl for? A date. You know."

"I'm pretty involved right now, Peter."

"With Glen Early?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You're not engaged or anything?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, then?"

"Call me if you want to," Joana said. "I'm in the book. *J. Raitt* on Beachwood Drive."

"I'll find you," Peter said. He walked with her out onto the porch and watched as she descended the steps to the street.

Joana climbed into the Datsun and sat for a long minute behind the wheel before starting the engine. Coming here had been foolishness, she told herself. Tarot cards! That was for people who believed in tea leaves and crystal balls and all that supernatural crap. And Peter Landau was no seer, he was just another guy on the make. Joana was a hard-headed, intelligent young woman, not some superstitious dingbat.

And yet, she could not put out of her mind the picture of Death in black armor astride the white horse with the blazing eyes. The skull face under the upraised helm glared at her with empty eyes. The skull swam in Joana's mind, and blurred into the face of the woman behind the wheel of the station wagon.

Joana shook her head vigorously to clear away the troubling thoughts and cranked the little car's engine to life.

• • •

Up on the porch Peter Landau watched the Datsun turn around and head down the hill and out of sight. Then he went back inside the house. The late clouds had begun to drift inland from the ocean,

and it was growing cold.

Peter walked over and sat down on the love seat. He stared at the table where he had laid out the Tarot cards for Joana. It was the first time anything like this had happened to him, the first time he had lost control of a reading.

It had been his plan to give her one of his standard flattering readings, with the subtle suggestion that the time was ripe for a new romantic adventure in her life. That approach had worked many times, leading him into more beds than he could remember. With Joana, though, it was different. He had been uncomfortable from the start with the familiar routine. For the first time he could remember, the cards seemed to be actually telling him something. Something he did not want to know.

Years ago Peter had memorized the standard interpretations for each of the seventy-eight cards. He could weave them together glibly into any kind of a story he wanted to tell. For some reason, today he could not seem to talk his way around the portents of bad news, violence, and disaster. And then there was that damned Death card in the crucial number-ten position. Jesus, was he starting to believe in this crap?

Idly he scooped up the deck, shuffled, and cut it to his left into three piles. He chose the Magician, as usual, to represent himself, and began laying out the Keltic cross. It always relaxed him to weave brilliant futures for himself by giving his own special interpretations to the meanings of the cards.

He laid out the six cards of the cross and frowned. Many swords, a sign of strife. Especially bad, the Nine, Ten, and Page of swords. Sorrow, desolation, misfortune, pain, and an impostor exposed. How the hell could he make anything good out of that?

Peter was tempted to sweep up the cards and put them away, but some compulsion made him continue. Deliberately he put down the seventh, eighth, and ninth cards in the vertical row.

First came The Fool, that unheeding young man about to step over the brink of a precipice. Folly, indiscretion, thoughtless action. Then The Tower with its fearsome lightning bolt and falling bodies. And The Hanged Man, bound and suspended from a T-cross of living wood. The most ambiguous of the Tarot deck, but with a dark and sinister look. Bad news, all of them.

What the hell was he doing? This was only a game, wasn't it? He could make the cards say anything he wanted, couldn't he?

One more to go. The tenth card, the final outcome. Peter hesitated a long time. His fingers rubbed the crisscross design on the back of the card, and seemed to sense what it would be.

Don't turn that card, he told himself silently. If he did not actually see it, then it wouldn't exist.

His fingers moved without his willing them and slid the next card from the top of the deck. He flipped it face up in the tenth position. It was no surprise. It was Death.

Chapter 8

The air in the elevator grew rapidly cooler as Dr. Hovde rode down to the basement of the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital. The car came to a stop, the doors slid noiselessly open on oiled rollers. The doctor shivered when he stepped out into the tiled hallway. Powerful fluorescent lights gave the scene a harsh, blue-white clarity.

Dr. Hovde walked quickly past a row of heavy drawers set into the wall. One of the drawers was rolled out. The outlines of a body could be seen under a green sheet. One naked black foot protruded from under the sheet. A cardboard tag was attached to the big toe.

Hovde continued to the end of the hall and through a door with *Pathology Lab* lettered on frosted glass. Inside, the smell of disinfectant was sharp in his nostrils. There were four tables spaced across the room. The tops of the tables were metal grill work with troughs underneath to catch the spilled body fluids. At one end of each table was a stainless-steel sink, at the other a hanging scale for weighing organs as they were removed from the cadaver. Three of the tables were empty. On the fourth lay the naked body of Mrs. Yvonne Carlson.

Dr. Kermit Breedlove, the chief pathologist, a lanky man with an unruly shock of black hair, stood over the body with his arms folded. A wooden toothpick danced from one side of his mouth to the other. Dr. Hovde had always thought he would look more at home playing the piano in a saloon than cutting up dead bodies.

“Hello, Warren,” Breedlove said. “What brings you down to the icebox? Things slow upstairs?”

“For the moment.” Hovde walked over and stood next to the pathologist, looking down on Mrs. Carlson’s body. “I’m a little curious about this one.”

Breedlove shrugged. “What you see is what you get. Female Caucasian, middle to late fifties. Old appendectomy, more recent gall bladder.”

“Will you be doing an autopsy?”

“Got to,” said Breedlove. “According to the sheet, there was no doctor in attendance at the time of death.”

“I know. She died in a traffic accident.”

“That so? Doesn’t look very banged up.”

“It was her heart or something.”

“We’ll find out for sure when we go into her,” said Breedlove.

“Doesn’t the coroner usually handle these?”

“Normally, yes, but they’re crying short-handed downtown. Proposition 13, you know. As long as we’ve got the time and the facilities, I don’t mind helping them out now and then.”

Dr. Hovde remembered the manila folder under his arm. He took it out and passed it to Breedlove. “Here’s the police report.”

“Thanks.” The pathologist scanned the two typewritten pages and shook his head, making a disgusted sound.

“What’s the matter?” Hovde asked.

“Just another L.A.P.D. fuck-up. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“What do you mean?”

“This here report doesn’t go with this here cadaver, that’s all.”

Dr. Hovde felt a prickling sensation at the back of his neck. “Why do you say that, Kermit?”

The pathologist gave the folder a contemptuous slap with the back of his hand. “According to this, the dead woman here was driving a car in Westwood” — he looked up at the electric wall clock — ”just a little over an hour ago.”

“So?”

“So, the woman here on the table has been dead at least twelve and possibly twenty-four hours.”

“Are you sure?”

“This is my specialty, Warren, remember? I’ll be able to tell more when I cut her open, but just by looking at her I can assure you she wasn’t up and around this afternoon. Feel the epidermis.”

Dr. Hovde touched the woman’s pale forearm. The flesh was rubbery-firm and cold.

“Under normal conditions,” said Breedlove, “a body will retain some of its heat, especially when the weather is warm like today and the body is clothed like this one was, for six to twelve hours. This one is cold as a mackerel.” He used his thumb to peel back an eyelid. “Take a look at that.”

The woman’s eye was dry and lusterless, with a cloudy film over the cornea.

“If it was only an hour after her death, the fluids would still cover the eyeball, making it glisten,” Breedlove said.

“Aren’t there other conditions that could account for these things?”

“Maybe. Like I said, I won’t know everything until I go into her. I’ll tell you another funny thing about this one. Look at her feet.”

Dr. Hovde followed the pathologist’s pointing finger and saw that Yvonne Carlson’s feet and lower legs were discolored a dark purplish-red. Breedlove slipped both hands under the body and expertly flipped it over onto the stomach.

“Now look at her back.”

The woman’s flesh was unnaturally pale from the neck all the way down to the midpoint of the calves, where the discoloration began.

“She is supposed to have died in a supine position, according to the police report,” said Breedlove.

“That’s right. She got out of the car after it stalled, took a couple of steps, and fell. Nobody moved her, and she lay there on her back until the ambulance came.”

“And in the ambulance they’d have her strapped down, again on her back.”

“That’s the procedure.”

“And when you saw her she was on her back, likewise when she came down here.”

“What are you getting at?”

“If that was the way it really happened, the blood, when the heart stopped and circulation ceased, would have settled into the lowest part of the body. With the body in the supine position, that would be the subcutaneous vessels of the back of the neck first, then the shoulders and the rest of the back. The shoulder blades and buttocks, where the skin was compressed by the supporting surface, would have remained free of blood and pale. The stagnant blood would congeal there, giving us the characteristic discoloration. As you can see, the woman’s back has no sign of postmortem lividity, but there is advanced lividity in the feet and lower legs.”

“Thanks for the lecture,” Hovde said drily, “but what does it mean?”

The pathologist ticked off one finger. “It could mean she died by hanging, but as there are no abrasions or discolorations at the throat, and none of the usual signs of asphyxiation, we can eliminate that.”

“We *know* she didn’t die by hanging,” Hovde said impatiently.

Breedlove ticked off the second finger. “Then we go to another possibility.” His eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Get to it, Kermit.”

“This woman was walking around for some hours after she was dead.”

The pathologist’s laughter rang in the tile-walled laboratory.

Dr. Hovde stared at him.

"Just having my little joke," Breedlove said.

"Oh, that's funny. That's very funny."

"Look, Warren, if you're going to come down with a case of sensibilities, go on back upstairs and patch up your emergencies. Down here, without some kind of a sense of humor a man would go crazy in a hurry."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry. When are you doing the autopsy?"

"As soon as the husband comes in to I.D. her. Hey, this wasn't somebody you knew, was it?"

"No. I think it might involve somebody I know, though. I'd like to hear what results you get."

"Sure. Give me a call."

Dr. Hovde left the laboratory and walked back up the hall past the refrigerated drawers. They were all closed now. He rode back up in the elevator, and as the temperature warmed he felt as though he were returning to the land of the living.

Things were still quiet in the emergency ward. The young resident was removing a splinter from the foot of a little girl who stared at him with huge adoring eyes.

Dr. Hovde washed his hands and dropped a quarter into the machine for a cup of bitter coffee. He carried it back into the office cubicle and sat down at the desk to think about Mrs. Yvonne Carlson, lying dead on an autopsy table downstairs, and young Joana Raitt, nearly hit by a car seemingly driven by this woman many hours after she died.

Hovde lit a cigarette, holding it down below the window out of habit so no one could look in and see him smoking. He tried to relate the strange automobile accident to the story Joana had told him this morning about the hallucinations she experienced after her near-drowning. Hallucinations, or whatever the hell they were. Was there a connection? He concentrated, trying to remember exactly

what Joana had told him.

His thoughts were shattered by the ringing of the alarm bell. Two ambulances wailed up to the door with victims of a gasoline-tank-truck explosion on the San Diego Freeway. In the frenzied activity of the next several hours Dr. Hovde put out of his mind the puzzle of Joana Raitt and the dead woman downstairs.

Chapter 9

Joana awoke on Friday with a vague feeling that all was not well. Her brain felt sluggish with the residue of troubled dreams. The dreams slipped away as quickly as she tried to remember them. Then the cobwebs cleared and she remembered the unsettling experiences of the last two days. She pushed the images out of her mind and concentrated on immediate tasks.

Out of habit she rolled over to look at the clock. Seven-fifteen exactly. In another five minutes the alarm would beep if she allowed it to. She punched off the alarm button and switched on the radio. A manic morning disc jockey yammered away nonstop while Joana collected her thoughts.

She reached up and drew back the curtains across the bedroom window. The morning was overcast. It was June, what could you expect? Joana allowed herself five more minutes curled up under the covers, then swung out of bed.

She pulled on a robe and went outside and down the path to where the morning *Times* lay, folded and tied with string. She carried the paper inside and scanned the headlines. There had been a terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv, a student riot in Mexico City, and a congressman censured in Washington. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Back inside, Joana walked through to the kitchen and plugged in the electric coffeepot. The water and coffee she had measured in the night before. Then she returned to the bedroom, peeled off her robe and pajamas, and got into the shower.

It felt good to get back to the schedule of little things she did every day. The familiar routine was welcome after the violent

disruptions of her life in the past forty-eight hours. She looked forward with pleasure to returning to work this morning. The job was interesting and challenging, and Joana was good at it. When her boss moved up, which figured to be in two or three years, she would have a good shot at becoming advertising manager.

She turned off the shower and dried herself vigorously. From her closet she selected a plaid skirt-and-vest outfit and carried the newspaper with her into the kitchen, touching things as she walked past, enjoying the familiar look and feel.

The little house where Joana lived was on Beachwood Drive in a quiet neighborhood above Hollywood. Originally it had been a guest cottage on the grounds of a large estate. The main house had been torn down some years ago to make way for an apartment building, and the guest house was scheduled to follow soon. While she had it, Joana enjoyed the feeling of living in a house that was all her own in an age of apartments. The house was just one room deep, with the rooms set end to end like a train: living room, den, bedroom, kitchen. The place was hard to keep clean and expensive to heat, and the roof leaked in heavy rains, but there were no neighbors to contend with, living just a wall's width away from you. Also, there was a nice spread of lawn out in front with oleanders and palmettos and great jungly ferns that were cared for by the real-estate company that owned the property.

Joana made herself two slices of toast, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down with the *Times*. She skimmed over the bad news and discarded Section 1 for the sports page. Things were better there. The Dodgers had come up with two runs in the ninth last night to beat the hated Reds in Cincinnati. Way to go.

She poured another cup of coffee and lit her first cigarette of the day. By the end of the day she would have smoked no more than half a pack. Were it not for the self-righteous militancy of the antismoking people, Joana would have given them up completely.

She kept to her ten Salems a day as a token rebellion.

Behind her the screen outside the kitchen door rattled. Joana got up and opened the door. Standing outside was a burly black cat with a torn ear. He had been abandoned as a kitten and now lived very well by his wits, mooching food and shelter from the soft-hearted residents of the neighborhood.

“I’m sorry, Bandido, I don’t have anything for you this morning.”

The cat looked up at her with disbelief in his luminous green eyes.

“Well, let me look, maybe there’s a scrap of something.” She pushed open the screen and the black cat sauntered in. In the refrigerator she found the end piece of a block of cheese, chopped it into bite-size morsels, and put them in a saucer. The cat sniffed at the cheese, poked at it with a paw, and finally ate.

“I’m so glad you approve,” Joana said.

She went into the bathroom to put on her makeup, came out and removed the cat from her bed where he was feigning sleep, and left for work.

Another thing Joana liked about her location was that she had a direct route to the office that involved no freeway driving. She dropped down Vine Street to Santa Monica, then headed west through the tacky part of Beverly Hills to Century City, the island of gleaming high-rise office buildings across from 20th Century-Fox studios. Traffic slowed as she approached her building and the cars funneled into the subterranean parking area. While Joana was stopped for a moment a boy on a skateboard rolled up beside her on the street side. He carried an armload of flowers — red roses and pink carnations — divided into bouquets of twelve and wrapped in tissue, paper.

“Hi, Joana,” said the boy. “I didn’t see you yesterday. Were you sick?”

“Hello, Davy. No, I wasn’t sick, I just took the day off.”

“That’s good.” The boy smiled at her, a sweet, childlike smile. He had the body of a rangy fourteen-year-old, but his mind would be forever seven.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he said. He took a rose from one of the bouquets and handed it to her. “This is for you.”

Joana fumbled in her purse while watching for the car ahead of her to start moving.

“You don’t have to pay for it,” Davy said. “That’s just from me.”

“Well, thank you very much, Davy. That’s awfully nice.”

“Ah, that’s all right.”

A panel truck sped past in the traffic lane just beyond where the boy was standing balanced on his board. Joana winced.

“You worry me, Davy, rolling around on that thing in all this traffic.”

“Ah, I’m okay. I can always get out of the way if somebody’s coming too close.”

“Be careful, anyway.”

“I will.”

The line of cars began to move and Joana drove on through the cavelike entrance to the underground parking. She inserted her coded parking pass into a slot and the cross-arm barrier rose to let her car through. She drove down the curving inclines to the second sublevel, where her company kept an area reserved for employees. She got out of the car and sniffed at the rose Davy had given her. Smiling, she promised herself she would buy a bouquet tonight on her way home.

She rode the elevator up to her floor and was welcomed back enthusiastically, although she had been off only one day. The advertising manager had a stack of back-to-school layouts for her to approve, and Joana plunged into the job eagerly.

The hours passed quickly and pleasantly enough, yet Joana sensed a growing anxiety. It took a while before she recognized the cause. It was Glen. She had not spoken to him since leaving his apartment yesterday morning, and that exchange had been none too warm. Why, she wondered, hadn't he called?

Yesterday, of course, had been hectic, and even if Glen had called, she was probably not at home. She might have called him last night, but by the time she had gone through her examination with Dr. Hovde, the business with the wild woman driver, and Peter Landau with his Tarot cards, she was exhausted. When she finally got home she had not felt like talking to anybody.

At three o'clock she stopped waiting for a call from Glen and picked up her own phone. She punched the button for an outside line and dialed his number at Datatron, his company in Torrance. Usually she did not like to call him at work, but it was silly to sit here wanting to hear from him and not doing anything about it.

She reached Glen's secretary, an attractive but noncompetitive redhead she had met a couple of times.

"Hi, Vicki, this is Joana Raitt. Is Glen busy?"

"He hasn't been in the office at all today. He's out calling on subcontractors."

"Oh. Will you give him a message to call me?"

"I'll do it, but he may not come back here."

"Thanks anyway."

As quitting time drew near, the other employees began to perk up with the thank-God-it's-Friday flow of adrenaline. Joana became steadily more depressed. Glen had not called. Although they had never made it a formal arrangement, spending weekends together had become a regular thing for her and Glen. She hoped the little disagreement they'd had at his place yesterday would not be one of those foolish arguments that ballooned into a major quarrel and wrecked a relationship.

Joana was a little surprised to discover just how much she really cared for Glen Early. Being a liberated young woman with a lively career and a bright future was well and good, but as far as Joana was concerned it didn't amount to beans if there was no man to share it with. A strong, caring man. Glen.

Five o'clock came, and still no call.

One of the girls from the art department stopped by her desk.

"A bunch of us are going over to Señor Pico's for margaritas," she said. "Want to come?"

"No, thanks," Joana said. "I've got some copy to get ready for the printer by Monday morning, so I'm going to hang in here a while."

"Listen to the company woman. Anyhow, if you get through before too long, come on over."

Joana gave her a noncommittal smile. Friday night after-work parties with the gang usually turned into bitching sessions about the job, the bosses, and the company. Joana liked it here. In her opinion, anybody who was unhappy with a job should leave and find something else to do. The complainers got no sympathy from her.

The copy she had stayed to prepare was not much of a job, and in half an hour she had finished it and stacked it in her out box. The big empty office oppressed her, and now she was anxious to leave. She said good night to the security guard and rode the elevator down to the first sub-basement.

Most of the people who worked in the building were gone now, and it was too early for the dinner and theater crowd to start coming in. Joana's footsteps echoed in the concrete cavern as she walked toward her car.

She got out her key and inserted it in the door lock, then froze at the sound of running feet behind her. She whirled and saw a man running down the aisle toward her.

Glen Early came pounding up and stopped in front of her, breathless and a little red in the face.

"I was afraid I'd missed you," he said. "I went up to your floor, but the security man told me you had just left."

"What is it, Glen? Something important?"

"You're damned right it's something important." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her hungrily. Joana let her body respond, and when they broke apart there were tears in her eyes.

"I love you, lady," he said. "And I've missed you."

"It's only been a day."

"So what? I was worried that I might have messed up somehow yesterday by not telling you how important you are to me."

"Me too," she said, laughing and hugging him. "I tried to call you at Datatron."

"I was out of the office all day, in meetings, and couldn't get to a phone. I'm sure glad I caught you."

"So am I."

"Got any plans for the weekend?"

"I was going to start a new thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, but I suppose I could postpone that if I got a better offer."

"Want to go to the mountains?"

"You and me? All weekend?"

"Yeah. We'll get a cabin off by ourselves at Big Bear. No parties, no discos, no swimming pools, just us and nature."

"It sounds like fun."

"Great. My car's outside in a red zone. I'll follow you home, and you can throw a couple of things in a bag, and we'll take off."

Joana drove Glen up to the street level and waited while he jogged back up the street to his car. Davy, the young flower seller, rolled up beside her car on his skateboard.

"You're about the last one out tonight, Joana."

"Do you keep track of everybody in our building?" she asked,

smiling.

“Just the people I like. You look happy.”

“Do I? I guess I am, Davy. How many bouquets do you have left?”

“Only these two — one roses and one carnations.”

“I’ll take them both.”

Joana took the flowers through the window and passed the money out to Davy. Glen pulled up behind her in his dusty Camaro and beeped the horn. She drove off toward Hollywood feeling warm and buoyant. Suddenly the weekend ahead was bright with promise, the dark thoughts that had clouded her mind were forgotten.

Chapter 10

It was the irregular *thwok, thwok* of a tennis match on the court outside his apartment that woke Dr. Warren Hovde on Saturday morning. He had left the sliding glass door open during the night with just the screen across the doorway, to let the fresh air in. Marge had taught him to sleep with the window open, winter and summer, and now he found it impossible to sleep otherwise.

He rolled over and squinted at the alarm clock on the bedside table. Half past eight. A whole day stretched out in front of him with nothing to do. Saturday had always been family day when the kids were little. He and Marge had taken them on picnics or to the beach or to Disneyland. Then when the kids grew older and found their own friends and activities, he and Marge had gone out on their own little trips of exploration in and around Los Angeles. They had found dozens of delightful little shops and restaurants and picnic spots that way, which were not in any guidebooks.

All right, enough of this nostalgic horseshit, he told himself, and rolled out of bed. He did his morning quota of sit-ups, push-ups, and isometrics, then took a shower. It would be a good day for a round of golf, but he had not enjoyed going to the club since he and Marge split up. People didn't come right out and ask questions, but he could tell they were curious. They expected some sort of explanation, and he was not ready to give one.

The night just passed had been a restless one for Warren Hovde. A troubling dream had fragmented his sleep. While he shaved he tried to remember what the dream was about. Then it came to him — Yvonne Carlson, the D.O.A. at the hospital

yesterday. His mind, waking or sleeping, would not let go of the contradictions between the condition of the body, dead at least twelve hours, and the accident report, with witnesses seeing Mrs. Carlson getting out of a car and falling to the ground some ten hours after she should have been dead.

After a quick look in his poorly stocked refrigerator, Dr. Hovde went out to a nearby Sambo's for breakfast. He bought a copy of the *Times* and read it over a breakfast of sausage and eggs. There was no mention, of course, of Yvonne Carlson or the accident. One unspectacular death, more or less, on the streets of Los Angeles was hardly newsworthy.

He finished his breakfast and returned to his apartment at the Marina Village. This morning the sight of all the tanned, energetic young people coming and going depressed him. They all seemed so thoroughly satisfied with themselves, so confident about the direction of their lives. Hovde went inside and sat down to try to catch up on his medical journals.

After less than a hour he gave up. He went to the telephone and punched the number of the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital. He asked the switchboard operator to connect him with Dr. Breedlove. After a series of clicks and buzzes the pathologist came on the line.

"Hello, Kermit, Warren Hovde here."

"Yeah, Warren, what can I do for you?"

"Remember the woman who came in yesterday afternoon, Yvonne Carlson, D.O.A.?"

"Female Caucasian, fifty-seven."

"Yes, that's her. Did you finish the autopsy?"

"Last night."

"What did you find?"

"Hang on, I'll get the sheet on her."

There was a clunk as Breedlove set the receiver down on

something hard. Hovde gazed out the window at the tennis players while he waited for the pathologist to come back on the line.

"Okay, here it is. Cause of death, ventricular fibrillation. Significant findings, congestion of viscera, slight edema of the lungs, and petachial hemorrhages in the conjunctiva, pleura, and pericardium. Irregular charring and blistering of the fingers and palm of right hand. Deep symmetrical burns on the balls of both feet."

"And that adds up to what?" Hovde asked.

"Instantaneous cardiac arrest due to the passage of low-tension current through the body."

"You're telling me she was electrocuted?"

"Exactly."

"And the time of death?"

"Midnight Wednesday, give or take a couple of hours."

"But none of that jibes with the accident report. The woman was seen alive by several witnesses on Thursday afternoon."

"So, like I said at the time, the accident report was fucked up. It wouldn't be the first time. And autopsies do not lie."

"Who identified the body?"

"Let me see …" Paper rattled on the other end of the line. "Here it is. The husband, Avery Carlson. Came in at four o'clock and made a positive I.D."

"Do you have Carlson's address?"

"Yeah." Breedlove read off a street and number in Glendale. Hovde thanked him and hung up.

Now what the hell, he wondered, did he do that for? Everything about the case made him uncomfortable — the wide discrepancies between the accident report and the autopsy findings in the cause and time of Yvonne Carlson's death, her relation if any to Joana Raitt, and Joana's bizarre story of drowning Wednesday night right here in the swimming pool. It was definitely not the

kind of thing a nice conservative G.P. should get mixed up in.

With that decided, Warren Hovde went out and got into his car and headed for Glendale.

• • •

Tucked in between Burbank and Pasadena, just north of Los Angeles, the city of Glendale backs gingerly up to the San Gabriel Mountains like a fastidious middle-aged lady edging away from raffish fellow passengers on an elevator. Unaffected by the cavortings of its better-publicized neighbors, Glendale had changed little since World War II.

The Carlsons' house was a white frame bungalow on a quiet street lined with tall palm trees. The house was freshly painted, with apple-green shutters at the windows. The square of lawn that lay between the house and the sidewalk showed the results of affectionate care. Dr. Hovde followed the flagstone path to the front door and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a dark, slim woman in her mid-thirties.

"Yes?"

"How do you do. I'm looking for Mr. Avery Carlson."

"May I ask what it's about?"

"It's about Mrs. Carlson. I'm Dr. Warren Hovde." He had learned, not long out of medical school, that the title *Doctor* opened more doors than a twenty-dollar bill.

"Just a minute, please."

The woman left the door ajar and moved out of sight. Hovde could hear her conversation with someone in the room adjoining the small hallway. "Who is it?" said a low-pitched man's voice.

"It's a doctor. He asked for you, Daddy."

"I don't want to talk to anybody unless it's really important."

"He said it's something about Mama."

“What’s his name?”

“Dr. Hovde, I think he said.”

A pause, then, “I don’t remember him. But never mind, I’ll talk to him.”

A man of about sixty came to the door. The flesh of his face sagged, and there were brownish patches under his eyes from lack of sleep.

“I’m Avery Carlson,” he said.

“Mr. Carlson, I’m very sorry about your loss. I hope you’ll forgive me for intruding at this time.”

“Yes, thank you,” the man said absently. “What is it you want?”

“I was at the hospital yesterday when your wife was brought in, and there are some things about her case that I find confusing. I’d appreciate it if you could clear them up for me.”

“I don’t suppose this is idle curiosity, Doctor?”

“Not at all. You see, in a roundabout way your wife’s accident is connected with a patient of mine. It could be very helpful to me, and beneficial to my patient, if I knew more of the facts.”

Avery Carlson studied his face for a moment, then apparently decided he was sincere. “Come inside.”

Hovde entered the neat little living room. The furniture was sturdy and old, and wore bright, fresh slipcovers.

Carlson gestured toward the woman who had answered the door. “This is my daughter Nadine. She’s staying with me until … for a few days.”

“How do you do,” said Hovde.

“Nice to meet you, Doctor. Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Please don’t go to any trouble.”

“No trouble, it’s already made.”

Nadine went out through an archway into the dining room, then through a swinging door that led to the kitchen.

“Have a seat, Doctor,” Carlson said. “You’ll excuse my manners, I hope. I’m not quite thinking straight yet.”

Hovde chose the sofa. Carlson settled himself stiffly into an overstuffed chair facing him. Nadine returned with a tray bearing coffee, cream, sugar, and a plate of oatmeal cookies. She set the tray down on the coffee table, placed one cup before Dr. Hovde, and carried the other to her father.

Hovde added cream to his cup and smiled his thanks to Nadine. Carlson set his cup on the floor next to his chair and forgot about it.

“All right, Doctor, what can I tell you?”

Dr. Hovde let his gaze range over the cozy room. There was an antique pendulum clock on the mantel, framed graduation pictures, wedding pictures, baby pictures. Little figurines of china and glass, well dusted, stood on a three-sided knicknack shelf in one corner. Over the fireplace was a framed, blown-up photograph of a desert sunset. Hovde searched for words. How did you tell a man who lived in a solid, ordinary, old-fashioned house like this that you suspect his wife may have been walking around half a day after she died?

Finally he said, “I wonder if you could tell me, Mr. Carlson, if anything unusual happened to your wife during the day before the accident?”

“Unusual? What do you mean?”

“Anything at all that was a change of pattern. Anything different from the way she normally acted or spoke.”

Carlson looked at him intently. For the first time the hurt, tired eyes showed a spark of interest.

“As a matter of fact, there was a whole lot different about the way she acted.”

“In what way?”

“First I’d like to know why you’d ask me a question like that.”

“It’s a matter of the medical reports. It would help a lot in

completing them properly to have some background information." Well, that was more or less the truth, Hovde told himself, and it was sure better than scaring hell out of the guy.

Carlson pulled on his lower lip for a moment. "All right," he said finally, "if it will help someone I'll tell you about it." He looked over at his daughter.

"If you don't need me for a while," she said, "I think I'll run down to the store and pick up something for dinner." She nodded to Hovde and went out the front door.

"The whole business started Wednesday night," Carlson said, "about midnight."

"Midnight?" Hovde jumped on it, remembering the pathologist's estimate of the time of death.

Carlson looked at him curiously. "That's right. I was working up in Santa Barbara on a construction site. That's my business, construction. We finished up late Wednesday night, but I decided to drive on home instead of spending the night up there in a motel like I do sometimes. I called Yvonne and told her I was coming. She likes … she liked to know when to expect me.

"I got home about eleven-thirty, and she was in the tub. I looked in on her and she said she wanted to be all clean and sweet-smelling for … well, that's not important. Anyway, she seemed perfectly all right. Then, a little while later while I was changing my clothes in the bedroom, I heard her scream. Then there was this big thump in the bathroom, like somebody falling down. I went running in, and there was Yvonne stretched out on the floor, her mouth open and … well, she didn't look good. She had a hair dryer in her hand, and it was still running. I saw right away what had happened and yanked the cord out of the wall. But Yvonne didn't move."

Carlson's voice choked off, and he sat working his hands together, staring down at them.

To give the man a chance to recover himself, Hovde said, “Do you mind if I take a look at the bathroom?”

Avery Carlson did not raise his eyes. “It’s at the end of the hall.”

Hovde walked down the short hall and found the bathroom. It was sparkling clean, like the rest of the house. On a glass shelf over the toilet tank rested the hair dryer. It was one of the old bulky models that had been supplanted in recent years by more compact versions. The cord was not plugged into the wall.

He picked up the dryer and examined it. At the base of the handle, where the double wire entered through a hole in the heavy plastic, an eighth of an inch of the rubber insulation had worn away. It bared just enough of the naked copper wire to make contact with the skin if it were held just so.

As he replaced the dryer, Hovde’s eye caught a rolled-up pink shag bathmat that had been stuffed into the wastebasket beside the sink. He pulled the mat out and unrolled it. In the center were two burn marks, a foot and a half apart, each the size of a nickel.

A voice behind him said, “Yes, that’s where she was standing.”

Hovde looked around, surprised to see Avery Carlson standing in the doorway.

“She stepped out of the shower onto the rug there, and it was soaking wet. Grounded her, I guess.”

Hovde nodded without saying anything.

“At first I thought she was dead,” Carlson went on in a flat voice. “She wasn’t breathing, and I couldn’t find any heartbeat. I didn’t know what to do, so I ran out to the living room and grabbed the phone. I was just dialing the operator to get help when I heard her voice behind me.”

“You heard Mrs. Carlson’s voice?” Hovde asked carefully.

Carlson took the scorched bathmat from Hovde, rolled it up, and shoved it back into the wastebasket. He turned and walked

back out to the living room. Hovde followed.

"Yes, it was Yvonne's voice," Carlson said when they were sitting down again. "I turned around from the phone and saw her standing right there where we came in just now. She was … she didn't have any clothes on, and she looked, I don't know, funny."

"How did she look?" Hovde persisted.

"She was pale, her whole body, too pale. And her eyes were glittery and didn't seem to focus right. I figured it was the effect of the electric shock, and I was just glad she was alive."

"What happened after that?" Hovde asked gently.

"First I tried to put my arms around her, but she backed off real fast, and that wasn't like her. Then I wanted to call a doctor because of the way she looked and all."

Carlson seemed to lose his train of thought.

"Did you call a doctor?" Hovde said.

"Yvonne wouldn't let me. Didn't want anything to do with a doctor. Even grabbed me by the wrist when I started to reach for the phone. A really strong grip she had, too. Lots stronger than normal for her.

"Okay, if she didn't want to see a doctor, I wasn't going to force her. I said, 'Let's go to bed,' but she said she wasn't sleepy. I said, 'Okay, I'll sit up with you.' But she didn't want to sit either. She walked, that's all, just walked. Around and around the house, out to the kitchen, back in here, through the bedrooms, then the kitchen again. I couldn't get her to sit still. It was like she was pacing the floor, nervous, waiting for something."

"How long did that go on?"

"All night, as far as I know. I dropped off to sleep finally on the davenport, and when I woke up she was still at it — walking, walking, stopping every now and then to look out the window. Some time while I was asleep she put some clothes on, but her hair was still all messed up."

“Did she say anything to you during all this time?” Hovde asked.

“Not much, just a few words. And when she talked her voice was funny. Empty-sounding, like there wasn’t any breath behind it.”

“She didn’t sleep?”

“Not that I know of. Didn’t eat anything either. When I woke up and saw the shape she was in, I called my office and told them I wouldn’t be in until later. I went out to the kitchen and made us a nice big breakfast — I used to do that on Sundays — but Vonnie wouldn’t eat a bite of it.” Carlson’s voice caught, and he sat silently working his hands for a minute before he continued.

“All this time she didn’t do anything but pace the floor and look out the window. Then, all of a sudden, about eleven o’clock, I guess, she grabbed her car keys off the mantel and headed out to the wagon. I ran after her. ‘Where you going?’ I asked her.

“She didn’t even look at me. ‘There’s something I have to do,’ she said, just like that. And that’s all. She got in the car and drove off, and that’s the last I saw of her. The next I heard was about three o’clock when I got the call from the police.”

Carlson passed a hand roughly across his lips. “I guess you know what happened after that.”

When he saw that Avery Carlson was not going to say any more, Hovde stood up and started moving toward the door. After a moment Carlson got up too.

“I want to thank you for giving me this much of your time,” Hovde said. “And again, please accept my sympathy.”

“Sure. Thanks,” Carlson said.

Dr. Hovde left the neat, clean little house and drove back toward Los Angeles. The story Carlson had told left him deeply disturbed. And beyond that, the man’s grief, still not fully realized, was a darker echo of his own loneliness for Marge.

“Oh, damn, damn, *damn!*” Hovde swore as he pulled onto the

freeway heading south. He had the answers he came to get, but was he any better off? He knew things now he did not want to know.

There was simply no natural explanation for what had happened to Yvonne Carlson. No amount of time spent researching in medical libraries could answer the frightening questions raised by the evidence. There was no avoiding the fact that Yvonne Carlson had died at midnight on Wednesday. The autopsy showed that, and the woman's husband was a witness to it, even if he didn't know it. When she lay on the bathroom floor with the faulty hair dryer in her hand and 110 volts surging through her body, she was dead. And yet, thirteen hours later she had been behind the wheel of a station wagon that had almost run down Joana Raitt. The same Joana Raitt who had experienced a weird "death" by drowning the night before. Coincidence? As much as Warren Hovde wanted to believe there was no connection between the two women, he could not buy it. Joana was involved, no question. And what was more, Dr. Hovde had an overwhelming premonition that she was in danger.

When he got back to the Marina Village, Hovde gave no attention to the graceful parade of boats heading out the channel toward the ocean. He hurried into his apartment, fighting against a growing, irrational sense of urgency. He looked through his notebook and found Joana Raitt's telephone number. He punched it out on the pushbuttons, then sat trying to decide what he would say to her. In spite of his better judgment, he was involved in this thing now, and he had to do what he could to help Joana. To warn her.

The receiver burred repeatedly in his ear. After ten rings he gave up. She was not at home. Hovde left his apartment and hurried around to the poolside. There lithe-bodied young men and women played happily in the water where this nightmare had begun three days ago. The doctor ignored them and jogged across the tiled deck to Glen Early's apartment. He pushed the buzzer,

leaned on it, but there was no response from inside.

All right, he had done everything he could. Whatever happened from now on, he need feel no guilt. He walked slowly past the pool and back to his own apartment. He closed the sliding glass door between him and the tennis players and drew the draperies.

He sat down and tried to concentrate on the medical journals he had set aside earlier. It was no good, the printed words would not combine into coherent sentences. They swam finally before his eyes, and he saw in his mind Yvonne Carlson, all pallid skin and glittery eyes, walking … walking.

Chapter 11

Peter Landau stood in front of the bathroom mirror and examined his reflection critically. It was Saturday night and he was freshly shaved and powdered, anointed with just a touch of a musky but masculine cologne. His teeth gleamed, his hair was blow-dried and gently sprayed into place. He should look like a million dollars. So why were those worry lines showing up around his eyes?

He clumped back out to the living room and dropped into the acrylic-fur recliner. Why, oh why, he asked himself again, did he ever get involved with Joana Raitt and her crazy tale of life after death? All he wanted was a little fooling around. Instead he got a whole truckload of trouble.

Ever since Thursday, when she had been here, there had been nothing but bad vibes. The readings he did for his regular clients had been mere recitations, delivered with none of his usual panache. It did not matter what he was working with — astrology, palmistry, the crystal, the Tarot — ominous shadows kept getting in the way of the glib nonsense he usually gave out. It was especially bad with the Tarot. A couple of his ladies had told him he didn't seem to be up to his usual form. He had passed it off as a touch of the flu, but if he didn't straighten out his act soon, his business would begin to suffer.

The shadows intruded on his personal life too. Tonight he had a date with an authentic *Playboy* centerfold named Susu. They were going to a party at Hugh Hefner's mansion in Holmby Hills. Ordinarily the prospect would have had Peter walking around six inches off the floor. Tonight he just felt like hell.

With a sigh he cranked the recliner forward and stood up. He went over to the table where the deck of Tarot cards rested. He shuffled, cut, and laid out the Keltic cross for himself. It was perhaps the twentieth time he had laid out the Tarot since Joana left Thursday. He was not enjoying it now the way he used to, as a game and mental exercise. Now it was real, and he hated it. There was a message for him in the damned cards, if only he could read it. All the years of rattling off phony interpretations for his ladies had blunted his sensitivities.

He stared down at the ten cards he had turned up to go with his own card, The Magician. They were all there this time, the ones that kept turning up. The Queen of Cups, The Tower, The Hanged Man, and Death. They were not always in the same positions, and sometimes one or more of them did not appear, but there was one card he could always count on seeing. Death.

An automobile horn honked several times down in the street. Peter ignored it and continued to stare gloomily at the cards.

All right, go over it once again. The Queen of Cups, that was Joana. She was somehow bound to his own future. The Tower, bad news no matter how you looked at it. The Hanged Man, hard to say what that one meant, but it was not a card to calm a man's nerves. And finally, Death. Plain enough, that one. But whose death, for Christ's sake? And when? More questions than answers.

High heels clattered outside on the wooden steps. The door buzzer sounded.

"It's open," Peter called, without looking up from the cards.

The door was flung in and a spectacular blonde girl marched into the room.

"Hello, Susu," Peter said.

The girl stood posing with her hands on nicely rounded hips. Her feet were angled in the classic model's stance. The electric-blue dress she wore was slit to show several yards of thigh. Above, her

bosom threatened to spill out at the first sudden movement.

"Didn't you hear me honk?" she demanded.

"I heard you." Peter stayed in the chair, looking at her. A million dollars worth of golden hair and china-blue eyes with a body that would stop a train, and he couldn't even get interested. What a hell of a Saturday night this was going to be.

"Well, come *on*, then. Are we going out tonight or not?"

"I've had a couple of really rough days, Susu. How would it be if we just stayed in tonight? We'll have a pizza delivered, listen to some music, watch TV. There's a good flick on the Z Channel."

"You're putting me on, aren't you. You're having a little fun with Susu."

"No, seriously, I just don't feel up to a big noisy evening."

Susu's blue eyes widened dangerously. "Well, isn't that a hell of a note. Ever since we met you've been going, 'Hey, get me into a party at Hefner's place.' So finally I go and do it, and let me tell you it wasn't easy. Hef doesn't let just anybody come to his parties, you know."

"I know he doesn't," Peter broke in, "and I appreciate the trouble you went to."

Susu continued as though he hadn't spoken. "When Hef invites a girl to come, he usually means the girl, period. So I hint around and hint around, and finally he says okay I can bring a friend. And what do I get from you?" She made her voice low and petulant.

" 'Let's stay home and eat pizza and watch TV.' What kind of crap is that?"

Peter gazed levelly at her from the Stratolounger. "I told you, Susu, I just don't feel up to it. What more can I say?"

"And I thought you were a swinger. Shit, you're ready for Leisure World, that's what you are. Turn on Lawrence Welk, why don't you? That's your speed."

"Look, sweetie, why don't you just go on to the party and quit

chipping at me."

"You want me to go to Hugh Hefner's party by myself after I made such a big deal about bringing a friend?"

"I'm sure he'll let you in."

"You bet your ass he'll let me in. That's not the point."

"Or take somebody else if you want to."

"I might just *do* that, Mr. Swinger."

"Goodbye, Susu."

She stood for a moment glaring at him, her ripe little mouth pushed into an unattractive pout. Then she spun around and flounced out of the house, giving him a last saucy twitch of her delectable behind.

Peter sat listening gloomily as Susu's heels clattered down the wooden stairs. Maybe she was right. Maybe he was flat getting old. After thirty a man ought to make some adjustments in his life style. Settle down, sink some roots. Anyway, it was a damn shame to waste Susu that way.

He levered himself out of the chair and walked over to the window. Down below, the street was dark, with only a faint glow from the street light on the corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Susu's taillights were just disappearing. Symbolic, Peter thought heavily, and turned away.

The Tarot cards were still spread out on the low table. With a sigh, Peter sat down. He scooped up the pack and began to shuffle, then stopped. His eye fell on the Ouija board that was propped on a bookshelf across the room. Peter had always liked to use the board with his clients because it was so easy to manipulate. Most of the time he could just rest his fingers on the planchette and let the lady shove it around to spell out any message she wanted. If the client didn't start moving it herself in a minute or so, he could easily propel the little heart-shaped table to the "right" answers to her questions. Never had it entered Peter's mind that there was any

mysterious force involved in the process. But then, never before had he seen anything in the Tarot cards, except a lot of meaningless pictures.

He squared up the Tarot deck, wrapped it in the silk scarf, and put it away. From the shelf he took the Ouija board and set it down on the table in front of the love seat. He placed the three-legged planchette on the board, then sat back for a moment looking at it.

Am I cracking up? he wondered. Have I been screwing around with the occult, faking my way through for so long that I've slipped a cog somewhere? Do I really expect this stupid board with the letters and numbers on it to tell me something?

Then Peter asked himself the same question he had asked Joana Raitt two days before: What have you got to lose? The disturbing thought occurred to him that he might have more to lose than he wanted to know, but, having come this far, he could not turn back.

Peter breathed deeply in and out several times, then placed his fingertips lightly on the planchette. He cleared his mind of all nonessential thoughts and forced himself to play fair. He vowed to do no, repeat *no* conscious moving of the table to spell out his own messages.

With his eyes closed Peter focused his concentration down to a bright pinpoint of energy. In his mind there was nothing but the question: *Is anyone here?*

Nothing happened.

He sat in the same position until his muscles ached with the strain of not moving. He kept his eyes closed. The question flashed on and off in his mind like an electric sign: *Is anyone here?*

It was an hour and fifteen minutes after he sat down that the planchette moved under Peter's fingers. Just a tiny spasm, less than half an inch across the board, but unquestionably the thing had moved.

Peter's eyes snapped open. He stared down at the planchette, which was again motionless. He riveted his concentration and asked the question again: *Is anyone here?*

The planchette moved again. First it was tiny pulses, a bare millimeter at a time, then in larger spurts, and finally in a smooth but seemingly aimless pattern of loops across the board.

Sweat beaded Peter's forehead. He stared down at the three-legged little table under his nerveless fingertips as it skated around the board on silent felt pads. The transparent plastic window with the pointer in the center seemed to be searching, searching.

Although he had sat grinding his teeth for more than an hour, willing this phenomenon with all the concentration at his command, Peter could scarcely believe it was happening. In this world objects do not move by themselves. All the years of pretending, all the false messages he had given to the trusting women who paid him, now came back like a cold wind.

Peter's head began to ache as he fought to keep his mind on the question: *Is anyone here?*

The planchette slowed its aimless looping around the board then and moved with purpose to the left side. It stopped with sudden finality with the plastic window directly over the word *Yes*.

At this point Peter's practice was to call for an identification of the spirit that was moving the planchette. It took up time and never failed to impress the clients. He usually arranged to spell out some glamorous Greek from the Golden Age, or sometimes an Indian, since they were commonly thought to be close to the psychic fringe. This time, however, he ignored the whole stagy business. It made no difference to Peter what power was moving the planchette under his fingers, the only thing that mattered was that it *did* move. Now there were questions to ask, and no time to waste.

Aloud he said, "I want to ask a question about Joana Raitt."

The table made no move. Peter took that as consent, and

continued.

"Is Joana Raitt in danger?"

The planchette moved at once, sweeping smoothly around the board and returning to the spot where it had started: *Yes*.

"Am I in danger?"

Again the quick circuit of the board and the return to the little drawing of the sun in the upper-left corner and the answer: *Yes*.

Peter's throat was dry. He forced himself to swallow. "Is my danger the same as Joana's?"

Again: *Yes*.

"Does all this have something to do with Joana's experience of 'dying'?"

Yes.

Peter looked quickly around the room. He had the irrational feeling that something might spring at him from the shadows.

Quickly he asked, "Is the danger present at this moment?"

The planchette slid across to the upper-right portion of the board and stopped. *No*.

All right, stop it, Peter told himself. You're getting hysterical. He closed his eyes again and put his mind to work. His body ached and he was wet with sweat as though he had just run a mile uphill. He could feel his energy draining away, and knew he must choose his remaining questions carefully.

"What is the nature of the danger?"

The planchette moved immediately to the two curved rows of letters at the center of the board. Without hesitating it slid along the top row and stopped for a moment on the *D*. Then, moving smoothly and with purpose, it stopped successively *on E … A … T … H*.

DEATH.

Oh, Jesus. Why, Peter asked himself, had he ever started this? No, that was foolish. There was no way he could have avoided it. It

never occurred to him to doubt the answer. There it was, spelled out for him in capital letters: *DEATH*.

"From where …" No, that was no good. Peter cleared his throat, swallowed, and began again. "In what form will the danger come?"

The planchette almost jumped out from under his fingers. It dropped to the second row of letters and held for an instant on the *W*. Skimming over the board now, it quickly spelled out the answer: *WALKERS*.

Peter waited for more, but the planchette rested. He could feel it vibrating under his fingers, as though there were a tiny motor humming inside.

"I don't understand. What does that mean? Is it a name?"

Again: *WALKERS*. Nothing more.

It made no sense. Keeping his fingers on the planchette, Peter rolled his head to wipe the dripping sweat from his chin onto the shoulder of his shirt. He searched for another way to ask the same question.

"This danger to Joana and me," he said slowly, "this … death, from what direction will it come?"

BEYOND.

Damn! He still knew nothing. Try again. "Who, or what, must we be on guard against?"

WALKERS.

An exasperated curse formed in Peter's throat, but then the planchette moved again under his fingers. It dropped down from the double row of letters to the line of numerals. There it came to rest on the number *4*. And there it stayed.

"Walkers? Walkers 4? I don't understand. What does it mean?"

The planchette quivered, but did not move.

Another question. Ask it something else. Peter's head ached like fury. There was blood on the inside of his lip where he had bitten it.

What to ask? *When*, that was it. He had to phrase the question carefully. He squeezed his eyes shut and the tears ran down his face.

"This danger, when will it come?"

The planchette shivered lightly under his touch, but stayed at rest.

"When, damn you, when will it come?" Peter found himself shouting.

The planchette seemed to withdraw from him a fraction of an inch.

"No, look, I'm sorry." God, I must be crazy, apologizing to a Ouija board. "What I mean is, do we have a deadline? Is there a crucial time for me? For Joana Raitt?"

Reluctantly, in little starts and stops, the planchette began to move again. It traveled back up to the letters. *S-A-I-N-T*, pause, *J-O-H-N*.

"Saint John? What the hell is that?" Peter was shouting openly now, but he could not control himself. "Damn it, I don't want riddles! I asked when! The danger … the death … what is the deadline?"

WALKERS 4. SAINT JOHN.

"I don't understand!" Peter heard his own voice screaming, and fought for control. Ask the thing something else. Have to get the answers now. This may be the last chance.

Speaking slowly and deliberately he said, "How can we avert this danger? How can we escape death?"

The planchette jerked as though an electrical charge had shot through it, then dropped to the bottom of the board. The pointer came to rest on the word *Goodbye*.

"No!" Peter cried. "You can't stop, I'm not finished. I don't understand the message. I have to have more information."

Somewhere in one of the canyons a solitary church bell tolled.

Under Peter's straining fingers the planchette went dead. Abruptly there was nothing at all mystical about it. It was just a light wooden platform with three felt-tipped legs and a pointer. There was no use asking it any more questions. It would not move again, and Peter knew it.

He collapsed back onto the love seat. His mouth was parched, his fingers cramped into the clawed position he had held on the planchette. He sagged back against the cushions and breathed raggedly for several minutes with his eyes closed.

WALKERS 4? SAINT JOHN? What the hell did it mean? The key to it all must be there somewhere, could he but find it. He ground his teeth and tortured his mind, but came up with no meanings for the cryptic messages.

Peter massaged his eyes with his fingers. He opened them and blinked. Through the window he could see the sky slate-gray over the black shoulders of the mountains. It was coming on to dawn. He cursed aloud. He had sat up all night with that damned Ouija board and didn't know fuck-all more than when he started.

The smart thing to do now, he told himself, would be to get the hell to bed. Sleep. Refresh his spent mind, soothe his aching body. Then, after a few hours in the sack, he could give things a fresh look and maybe figure out what the hell was meant by *WALKERS 4 … SAINT JOHN*.

Yes, sleep would be the smart thing to do now, no doubt about it. But hell, Peter thought, he hadn't done anything smart for several days. No use trying to start now. Besides, he felt in the very marrow of his bones the urgency of learning the answers to his questions.

Moving stiffly, he picked up the Ouija board and planchette, carried them across the room, and returned them to the bookshelf. From the writing desk he took the deck of Tarot cards. He peeled away the silk scarf, letting it float to the floor, and carried the deck

back with him to the table. He sank heavily onto the love seat, shuffled the cards, cut them, and once again began laying out the Keltic cross.

Chapter 12

The window was all the way open, letting in the crisp scent of evergreen. It mingled with the raw-wood smell of the cabin in a bracing combination no laboratory could reproduce. Joana rolled over in the narrow bed and nuzzled Glen Early's bare shoulder.

He kissed the top of her head. "Comfortable?"

"I don't ever want to move."

"We'll probably have to when the next renters move into the cabin."

"I suppose so. What time is it?"

Glen reached down to the floor on his side of the bed and groped around until he found his wristwatch. He brought it up and looked at it.

"Six o'clock."

"a.m. or p.m?"

"p.m."

"Damn, that means our weekend is almost over," Joana said.

"Almost."

"Do you realize we spent the entire forty-eight hours right here in bed?"

"We did not," Glen said. "Saturday we walked down to the little store for food and beer, and just this morning we took a hike up the trail by the lake."

"That's right," Joana said, "I guess I forgot about those." She rubbed a hand over Glen's naked torso. He had crisp, curly chest hair, a flat stomach, nice narrow hips, and …

"Are you trying to start something?" he said.

"Just keep something going."

He rolled over to face her. Joana looked deeply into his eyes. He kissed her and she returned it, her mouth open and eager. His hand moved down over the smooth curve of her back and came to rest on her bottom. She felt his rising sexual excitement against her thighs. She opened her legs. Glen's hand came around from behind her and slid into the damp nest between her legs.

Joana gasped as his strong fingers stroked her. She said, "I'm ready any time you are." Her voice was hoarse and whispery.

Glen threw off the sheet that covered them and shifted his position. Joana reached down to guide him into her. He was hard and hot, and she could feel his pulse throb in the big vein that ran along the bottom of his penis.

He rolled on top of her and she pulled him down, mashing her breasts against his chest. He was gentle at first and easy as he slid the length of him into her, then out. Gradually his movements became more insistent, even fierce, as the climax approached. She felt his release and the hot spurt of juices an instant before her own. Their bodies clung together, heaving, shuddering, then slowly quieting. Joana pressed her legs together, holding him inside.

"I love you, Joana," he said.

"Me too, you."

"Why don't we get married?"

She drew back her head and looked at him. "Did I hear right just now?"

"If you heard me ask you to marry me, you heard right," he said.

"You're kidding."

"Would I kid you in this position?"

"*Especially* in this position."

"Well, I mean it. How about it?"

Joana's entire body tingled electrically. She felt herself getting aroused all over again.

“You have such a romantic way with words,” she said with her mouth on his.

“If you want, I’ll do it later in rhyme, on bended knee.”

“That would be nice.”

“Seriously, Joana, I really want to be married to you. Spending these weekends together is great, and I’m always glad when we can get together during the week, but the days in between seem wasted. I don’t want to take a chance on losing you.”

“You mean it, don’t you.”

“Hell yes, I mean it.”

“What about just moving in together. Dispense with all the paperwork and stuff.”

“I thought about that, but to tell you the truth, I don’t think it would work for me. There’s just enough middle-class morality in my upbringing to make me uncomfortable with the idea. So I guess if we do it, it’s going to have to be legal.”

“Ah, my Glen, I do love you.”

“Then how about it?”

“All right.”

The new commitment acted on both of them as a powerful aphrodisiac, and it was another hour before they rolled out of bed and showered together to get ready for the trip home.

They talked quietly together about getting married as Glen steered the Camaro down the darkening road out of the mountains. They agreed they would not make any big deal out of the wedding, just tell a few close friends, then do it. They decided October would be a good time, right after the World Series.

As they came out of the mountains the road straightened, heading for the San Bernardino Freeway. The conversation lapsed. Joana’s buoyant mood and her happy thoughts of the future dimmed, and the lurking fear crept back into the car with her.

During most of the weekend she had been able to pretend that

the terrible thing in the swimming pool had never happened, and to keep out of her mind the events that had followed. But now they were returning from their cabin in the sky to the real world, and somewhere in this world lurked an unnamed menace. Joana laid a hand on Glen's thigh. He put his hand over hers for a moment and smiled at her. The bucket seats in the Camaro prevented her from moving as close to him as she would have liked.

They were both silent as they joined the freeway parade of people returning home to Los Angeles from the weekend. Glen had to give his full attention to his driving, and Joana did not feel like talking anyway. She snapped on the car radio and found an FM station that was playing easy-listening rock. For the remainder of the trip she closed her eyes and let Kris Kristofferson and Linda Ronstadt take over.

It was ten o'clock when Glen pulled up at the house on Beachwood Drive. He parked behind Joana's Datsun, and they walked together up the path through the shrubbery that led to her house.

At the front door Glen set down her bag and kissed her. Joana clung to him. For a reason she could not explain, she felt like crying.

"Glen?"

"Hmm?"

"We don't have to, you know."

"Have to what?"

"Get married."

He looked at her, his eyes deep and serious. "I know we don't. Are you having second thoughts?"

"No, not me. I just thought that you, up there with the trees and the moon and the cabin and all that romantic stuff, might have, well, got carried away."

Glen took both her hands in his. "Joana, hear me. I love you. I

mean I really, flat-out love you. And I want to marry you. You are the most important thing in my life."

She squeezed his hands. "But aren't you scared? About getting married, I mean?"

"Sure I am. A man would be a fool not to be a little scared. What about you?"

"I am too, a little. But I'll tell you one thing, I'm sure not scared enough to say no. Mister, you got yourself engaged."

Glen tilted her chin up, but before he could kiss her, the telephone bell shrilled inside the house.

Joana frowned. "Who would be calling me at this hour?" She unlocked the door. "Come in for a minute, Glen. I'll take care of whoever's on the phone, then we can say good night properly."

He followed her inside and closed the door.

Joana hurried to pick up the phone before it stopped ringing. The voice that spoke to her over the wire was high-pitched and agitated.

"Joana, thank God I finally got you. Where have you been all day?"

"I've been out. Who is this?"

"Peter. Peter Landau. Listen, I've got to talk to you. I think I've figured it out."

"Figured what out? What are you talking about?" She covered the mouthpiece and spoke to Glen. "It's Peter Landau."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know. He's not making sense."

"Joana, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here, Peter. What's this all about?"

"I don't want to talk about it over the telephone," he said.

"Why not, for heaven's sake?"

"I just don't. Can you come up here?"

"No way," Joana said firmly. "I just got home, I'm tired, and

I'm certainly not going anywhere without knowing what this is all about."

"I'll come to your place then."

"Peter, I'm not in the mood for visitors."

"I'm not a visitor. I have to talk to you."

"Besides, Glen is here."

"I don't care who's there. Damn it, Joana, I'm not putting a move on you. I've found out something. Something important as hell. It's vital that you know about it right away."

There was a jagged edge of hysteria to Peter's voice. Joana had no doubt he was deadly serious.

"All right," she said, "come on over, but don't make it late. I'm really tired."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

The phone went dead in Joana's hand. She stared at it a moment before hanging up.

"He insists on coming over here," she said to Glen. "Says he's found out something important that I should know. He sounded a little bit crazy. Can you stay until he gets here?"

"You couldn't drive me away," Glen said.

Joana put on a pot of coffee, and she and Glen sat uneasily together in the living room waiting for Peter Landau.

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Several blocks away, down the hill toward Hollywood, a big man with powerful shoulders walked silently toward Joana's house. The flesh of his face was unnaturally dark and bloated. His arms hung straight at his sides. The man's eyes were dull and dead.

Chapter 13

After he finally reached Joana by phone and made arrangements to go to her house, all the starch went out of Peter Landau. He sagged limply in his Stratolounger, braced now in the full upright position. His hand lay on the dead telephone for a full minute.

"What … the … fuck … have I got myself mixed up in?" he asked the empty room.

There was no answer.

Throughout his life Peter had danced nimbly away from all kinds of sticky situations. Taking Care of Number One was his way of life, and it was a full-time job. There was no allowance in his personal budget for getting involved with other people's problems. Especially not a problem as grotesque as the one bearing down on Joana Raitt.

So with fast footwork and a keen nose for trouble, he had managed for years to be Mister Uninvolved. And now look where he was — all the way in with both feet, and no way out.

"Oh, shit, fuck, goddamn!" he said aloud, and slammed his fist down on the broad furry arm of the chair. Then, with a heavy sigh, he hoisted himself to his feet and headed out the door.

It had been a full ten hours earlier, just before noon, that Peter had first called Joana's number. He had spent a sleepless Saturday night trying vainly to decipher the message of the Tarot cards and failing to get any further response from the Ouija board. Finally he had gone to his collection of books on the occult.

Over the years Peter had purchased the books largely for window dressing. They had worn leather bindings with a sensual

feel, and titles that hinted at mystical worlds beyond the five senses. The books, he thought, added a nice touch of scholarly research to the place. His clients had been suitably impressed.

Never before, however, had Peter sat down to read any of the books seriously. He had only skimmed through a couple of them to pick up some occult-sounding jargon, or to find some theatrical touch he could add to his consultations.

But never before had there been a real reason to search through the books. Beginning early Sunday morning Peter went through them systematically, looking for answers he was afraid to find.

He had written down, as accurately as he could remember it, his exchange with the Ouija board. On a sheet of paper he had the key words heavily underlined: *WALKERS 4 … SAINT JOHN*. He scanned the dusty pages for any references that might fit. The meaning of the message could be found somewhere in the old books, of that he was certain.

In the back of his mind there was an echo of the words from the story Joana had told him of her experience in the tunnel of death. Peter sorely regretted now that he had not taken notes, or at least listened more carefully to what she was saying. At the time, however, he was concerned only with getting Joana into bed. How unimportant that seemed now.

It had something to do with the voice that had so frightened Joana. There was a mention of St. John, and the number four. Beyond those hazy details, Peter could not remember.

Undeniably there was a connection between Joana's experience and the Ouija-board message for Peter. He felt driven now to find it. The Tarot had shown him that his own fate was bound to Joana's.

It was shortly before noon when he finally tracked down the answers. He came upon the key in two books: *The Symbolism of Paranormal Experience* and *Significant Dates in Witchcraft and Demonology*.

Peter checked and rechecked the books, hoping in vain to find he was mistaken. Finally he could not deny the horrifying answer. It was time to act. The first thing he had to do was tell Joana what he had learned. Then they could make plans on how best to fight the terror that stalked them both.

When he dialed Joana's number and got no answer on the other end, Peter could have cried in frustration. After the night-long session with the Tarot and the board, and the morning spent over the curious volumes of occult lore, he was consumed with a terrible sense of urgency in getting to Joana.

When he could not raise her, he tried Glen Early at the Marina. No answer there either. It was a simple deduction that Joana and Glen were out somewhere together. Peter prayed that they would return in time for him to share his knowledge before it was too late.

Throughout the afternoon he dialed both numbers repeatedly. Finally he forced himself to wait fifteen minutes between calls. He drank quarts of black coffee, but ate nothing. He had no appetite for food.

By nightfall Peter's head ached fiercely and his eyes burned. The muscles of his neck and upper back were tight as steel cables. Half a dozen times, to force himself away from the telephone, Peter returned to the books. Part of his mind still searched for a flaw in his findings, but in his heart he knew better. Each rereading of the passages, he had marked only convinced him anew of the imminent danger to Joana.

As the evening wore on, Peter's mind began to grow mushy. He found himself unable to concentrate on anything for more than a couple of minutes. This was no good. He knew he had to stay alert for when Joana returned from wherever she was.

He went into the bathroom and dug back into the cupboard under the sink. Pushed into a deep corner was the bottle he was after. It was still three-quarters full of bennies, the original hot-cross

aspirin. Peter had not used uppers since the days when he was scrambling around for acting jobs, but he had kept this bottle, thinking vaguely that there might be an emergency someday when he would need them. The emergency was here.

Peter shook two pills out of the bottle and swallowed them with water from the tap. They left a faint bitter aftertaste on the back of his tongue. He checked his watch. Eight-fifteen. He should feel the effects in an hour. The cobwebs would clear from his mind and he would be wide awake. Tomorrow he would cancel his appointments and sleep off the aftereffects, but for tonight he had to stay sharp.

At ten o'clock there was an answer at last at Joana's number. By then the benzedrine had taken hold, and Peter's words came out in an agitated rush. He knew it was futile to try to explain what he had learned over the telephone, especially since he could not fully control his voice. He had to see Joana, tell her of the danger face to face, so he could convince her of the urgency.

When Joana refused to come to his place, he quickly agreed to go to her. It made no difference to him whether Glen Early or a dozen Glen Earlys were there. As a matter of fact, it might be well for Glen to know about this too. If he could convince the practical-minded engineer that the danger was real and imminent, Glen would make one more player on their team.

Without bothering even to turn out the lights, Peter ran out of the house and down the stairway out in front. Once he tripped on the rickety wooden steps and caught the railing barely in time to keep from pitching forward head first. He continued to the street at a more cautious pace. It would be unforgivable now to get himself incapacitated when he was probably the only person in the world who could help Joana Raitt.

He swung open the door to the garage set into the hillside below the house. Inside, the Corvette gleamed sleek and powerful.

Peter jumped in, keyed the engine to life, and roared out into the night.

It took an effort of will to keep his foot light on the accelerator as he careened down Laurel Canyon Boulevard. Even so, the tires screeched in protest every time he took a curve.

After a journey that seemed endless, he reached Hollywood Boulevard at the foot of the canyon. He cranked the steering wheel to the left and floored the gas pedal. Just a mile and a half to go.

He tooled up Beachwood, squinting at the dim house numbers to check his progress. He let out a breath he had been holding unconsciously when he recognized Joana's Datsun parked at the curb. Behind it was a Camaro that probably belonged to Glen Early.

Peter jammed to a stop and sprang out of the car. The path across the yard to Joana's front door wound through heavy clusters of ferns and oleander bushes. Peter started toward the house at a trot.

A sound from close behind made him pull up suddenly. Crashing toward him through the heaviest growth of shrubbery came a man. He was over six feet tall and broad through the shoulders and chest. The man carried his hands awkwardly out in front of him, not even trying to push aside the brush. From one clenched fist dangled something that looked like a rope.

The man gave no sign that he even saw Peter. Without slowing, he continued in a long loping stride toward the house. Peter, his nerves jangling with the effects of the amphetamine, stared at him.

"Hey — " he began, but at that moment the man approached close enough for Peter to see his face. The skin was dark and congested-looking. Crooked teeth showed behind the man's drawn-back lips. And the eyes, oh Jesus, the eyes. There was no spark in them. They were flat. And they were dead.

God in Heaven, Peter thought, he's one of them.

Before he could react, the man was almost upon him. The

expression on the dark, heavy face was one of ferocious dedication. The gaze of his lifeless eyes fastened on Joana's house.

Without thinking what he was doing, Peter reached out for the man to stop him. A short, backhanded blow from the big man swatted Peter's hands away like a baby's. Peter lunged at him again, and opened his mouth to shout a warning to the house.

The shout never left Peter's throat. In a single swift motion the big man brought up the dangling thing he carried and whipped it around Peter's neck, cutting off his breath instantly.

Peter's hands flew to his throat, his fingers clawing for air. His sense of touch flashed the brain the irrelevant message that he was being strangled by a silk necktie. The more he struggled, the tighter drew the noose.

The face of the big man swam and wavered before Peter's eyes. Pinpoints of light danced in the darkness. The pressure on his throat was agonizing. Peter's last clear mental image was of a Tarot card — The Hanged Man. He heard, rather than felt, the soft crunch when his larynx collapsed. It was the end of all sensation.

• • •

The big man, still gripping the tie that cut into Peter's neck, dragged the inert form across the grass and into a thick clump of ferns out of sight from the house or from the street. Then he turned back toward the house and resumed the stiff, loping walk toward Joana's door.

Chapter 14

Inside the house, Joana and Glen waited. They sat close together on a low sofa Joana had bought at a used-furniture store and re-covered herself. A log burned in the fireplace without producing much warmth. They tried fitfully to talk, but both of them kept looking expectantly at the front door.

"What do you suppose Peter wants to see you about?" Glen said.

"I don't know," Joana said, "but whatever it is, it sounded serious."

Conversation died, and the two young people sat silently waiting.

A sudden noise from out in front of the house made them both start. There was a soft thump, then an indistinct shuffling sound. They turned and looked at each other. Glen tried a smile that did not come off.

"That must be Peter," Joana said.

"Must be."

Joana got up and walked over to the door. She opened it, peering out into the darkness. At first she could see nothing. Then she made out a shadowy male figure walking toward her across the lawn.

"Peter? Is that you?" Even as she spoke, Joana saw that the man approaching was too tall and too broad in the shoulders to be Peter Landau. She waited, puzzled.

"Is it him?" Glen called from back in the living room.

"I don't think so."

A feeling of apprehension grew in Joana. She remembered the outside light, reached over and snapped the switch. The bulb over the door lit up, and she saw the face of the big man walking toward her. It was dark and swollen. His eyes were flat, they did not reflect the light.

Joana took a step backward, still holding onto the doorknob.

"What is it?" she said. "What do you want?"

The man paid no attention. He strode up to the door and smacked the panel with the flat of his hand. The knob was wrenched from Joana's grasp as the door flew in and banged against the wall. Joana staggered backwards into the living room.

Glen jumped to his feet and stared at the man in the doorway. "Hey! What's the idea?"

The man paid no attention to him. The flat, dead eyes were fixed on Joana. She backed away, holding her hands up in ineffectual defense.

"Hold it right there," Glen said. He crossed the room to where the big man stood.

The intruder put one hand flat against Glen's chest and shoved him backwards. He seemed to put little effort into the push, but Glen stumbled back across the room, falling over the coffee table. The man ignored him and continued to advance on Joana. He held his hands out in front of him, the thick, stubby fingers reaching for her.

Joana backed away until her shoulder blades bumped against the far wall. "No!" she cried. "Let me alone!"

Glen scrambled to his feet. With an angry shout he rushed at the intruder. He balled his fist and swung with all his strength, hitting the man solidly on the hinge of the jaw. The sound was like a club smacking a side of beef. The man did not seem to know he had been hit. He continued to stalk Joana. Glen moved in front and hit him again. The man's upper lip split to the nose, showing teeth

and gums.

He paused in his pursuit of Joana and took hold of Glen, one big hand gripping him under each arm. With no more effort than if he were lifting a child, he picked Glen off the floor and threw him against the wall. Glen's head cracked against a hardwood beam. He sagged to the floor and lay there without moving.

Joana took advantage of the moment to move away from the wall. The intruder stood between her and the front door, blocking her escape that way. She had seen how fast he could move, so it would be useless to try to dodge past him. That left the kitchen door as the only way out. Joana ran through the rooms toward the kitchen. Behind her she heard the thud of the man's footsteps as he came after her.

For a moment she could not get the back door open, and panic rose in her throat. The big man came into the kitchen behind her. Joana dared not look around, but she could hear the low growling sound he made.

She fought with the latch, crying in frustration. Abruptly the door came free, and she was through it and outside.

As she started to run down the narrow paved walk leading from the kitchen door, something blacker than the shadows scooted between her feet. Joana tripped and fell heavily to the grass. The cat screeched and disappeared around a corner of the house.

The big man came through the door and bore down on her. As he loomed over her Joana could see the gleam of his upper teeth where the lip was split. The outstretched hands reached for her.

Joana scrambled away crab wise across the grass and managed to regain her feet. The intruder came on. He had her cut off now from the front of the house and the relative safety of the street. She ran in the only direction left open to her — back behind the house.

The grass back there had been allowed to grow longer than that in front of the house. Clumps of weeds and untrimmed

shrubbery clutched at Joana, held her back. Her pursuer, moving swiftly, heedless of the bushes, gained steadily.

Trying to watch back over her shoulder as she ran, Joana hit something that yielded, but would not be pushed out of the way. With a cold clutch of terror she realized she had run into the ivy-grown chain-link fence that separated the little house from the new apartment building behind it. The fence was seven feet tall and had spiky wire ends on the top. Under normal conditions it would have been a difficult climb for Joana. With a maniac charging at her it was unthinkable.

She ran along the fence, stumbling every few steps. She screamed now for help, help from anywhere. The darkness was all she had on her side. The pursuer had to stop repeatedly and look around for her. Apparently he could not see any better in the night than she could.

Lights began to blink on in the windows of the apartment building. Heads appeared in the bright rectangles. Voices called out.

"What's the matter down there?"

"Who is it?"

"Do you need help?"

"What's going on?"

Joana clutched the fence with her fingers hooked through the diamond openings. She stared through the ivy leaves at the apartment building, just a few yards away, but it might as well have been miles.

"Help me!" she cried. "Oh, please help me!"

Hearing her own voice, Joana knew the people from the apartment could never reach her in time. The fence would delay them until it was too late.

Behind her the brush crashed and the man came through, lunging for her.

Again Joana dodged out of his grasp. Her lungs ached, her

throat was raw from screaming. Sharp branches tore at her clothing as she flailed through the bushes. A sense of hopelessness welled up in her chest.

As she clawed her way along the fence an exposed root caught her foot like a snare. Her momentum carried her forward, and she fell hard on her stomach. The breath was slammed from her lungs. She writhed on the ground, fighting to draw in air. The brush parted and the big man stepped through. For a moment he stood looking down at her with his empty eyes. The torn lip gave him a hideous sardonic smile. Joana lay before him helpless, shaking. She was unable to draw a breath. The man's hands came toward her throat.

"Eeeeyah!" The piercing shout came from somewhere behind Joana's attacker. He hesitated, his head cocked, listening. There was a great crashing in the shrubbery. The man turned.

From where she lay Joana saw Glen charge into view and head for the big man. One of his hands was upraised, the fist clenched. He was holding something. As he came closer Joana saw it was a poker from the fireplace. The intruder turned away from her to face Glen.

"Get away from her," Glen ordered. He came to a stop six feet away from the man. He brandished the poker. "Get away. Get back!"

The big man uttered the low animal growl again and lunged for Glen. His move was sudden and decisive, but Glen was ready. He swung the poker down in a hammer blow. The man made no attempt to fend it off, and the heavy iron shaft cracked into his head. It did not even slow him down.

The sound of the blow made Joana retch. Slowly, painfully, she started to breathe again. She pulled herself over against the fence and crouched there watching the battle. Light from the windows of the apartment building now cast an eerie illumination over the

scene.

The big man seemed not to have felt the heavy blow from the poker. He lashed out with a backhand swipe. Glen partially blocked it, but the blow still had enough force to send him sprawling to the ground. He scrambled to his feet as the man turned his attention again toward Joana.

As the intruder came at her once more, Joana pulled herself up painfully with handholds on the fence. She heard Glen shout again, then saw him come up behind the man and swing the poker. It came down in a glancing blow on the man's head, and a flap of scalp tore away. Glen hit him two more times, solid, chopping blows. The man's skull cracked like a melon, and a yellowish jellied substance oozed out and ran down the side of his face. And still he advanced on Joana.

Glen moved quickly around to put himself between her and the attacker. The poker rose and fell, rose and fell. With each blow the sound of impact became mushier.

Joana had a hand pressed against her mouth. She tasted blood and realized she had bitten through the skin on her knuckle. A few feet away, the big man still tried to get at her as Glen hit him over and over again with the poker. The man's head was a shapeless mass with yellow shards of skull bone sticking out and the ooze of brains splattering everything. Joana wondered at the fact that there was so little blood.

The sound of running feet.

Voices shouting.

People from the apartment were climbing over the fence and running around from the street side toward the grisly tableau. When he heard them coming, Glen stood back. His breath came in labored gasps. His face was a mask of revulsion. The thing that stood swaying before him now wore a shapeless blob for a head. It stood there, turning from side to side, as though it could still see

with the ruined eyes.

The first of the arriving people reached the scene and pulled up abruptly at the sight of the man. Others ran up and stopped just as suddenly. The mutilated creature stood turning, turning, surrounded. For eerie seconds no one spoke, no one moved. Then without warning the intruder collapsed on the ground and was still.

Glen stood for a moment looking at the fallen man. Then he dropped the poker into the grass and rushed to the fence, where Joana still crouched, her fingers laced through the wire. He gently freed her hands and pulled them away from the fence. He knelt beside her and held her close against his chest.

"Are you hurt?" he asked in a whisper.

"No, he didn't get to me. You, darling?"

"A bump on the head. I'm all right."

And then the tears came.

The people who had run onto the scene moved in and edged cautiously closer to the man lying in the weeds. Others came over to join Glen and Joana.

"What happened?" somebody said.

"I saw it all from my bedroom window," somebody else answered. "That big guy there was like a maniac. He kept going after the girl. The other guy tried to stop him, but he just kept coming. He kept taking those shots to the head like they were nothing."

"Jesus, *look* at his head."

"There's nothing left on top."

"How did he stand up as long as he did?"

"He was a maniac. Really freaked out."

A man knelt on the grass where Glen was holding Joana. "Are you two all right?"

"Yeah," Glen managed. "We're okay." He nodded his head toward the crumpled body of the big man. "What about that one?"

“He’s finished.”

Glen groaned softly.

“Hey, don’t worry, you couldn’t help it. Enough of us saw what happened. There was nothing else you could have done.”

A police siren wailed in the distance and grew steadily louder.

Chapter 15

Dr. Hovde sat on a metal stool in his examination room facing his patient, Mrs. Helen Ingalls. She perched on the edge of the table, holding her right arm gingerly out in front of her.

"It hurts from about here," she pointed to a spot on her lower triceps, "all the way through the elbow and down to my forearm."

The doctor passed his fingers lightly along the woman's arm. There was no swelling, no discoloration. He applied a little pressure.

"Ouch," she said.

Dr. Hovde nodded, satisfied.

"It hurts especially when I serve," she said, "and when I have to reach for a backhand."

"It looks like you have a classic case of tennis elbow," Hovde said. "How long have you been playing the game?"

"Twenty years, for Christ's sake."

"Have you made any changes in your game lately?"

Mrs. Ingalls gave an embarrassed shrug. "Well, I have been trying to improve my serve. I mean, with the little pitty-pat delivery I've been using, I'm a sitting duck for a winner off the return. Don has been making excuses to get out of being my partner in doubles."

Dr. Hovde shook his head at the folly of a man and wife teaming up to play tennis. He said, "What kind of a change did you make in your serve?"

"The thing is, I've been watching Martina Navratilova, and she really powders the ball. I'm trying to serve more the way she does it, and I've only just started getting results."

“I’ll bet,” Hovde said. “And one of the results you’re getting is the tennis elbow. Remember, Helen, Martina Navratilova is a professional. She is also six inches taller than you, at least forty pounds heavier, and she’s left-handed. I suggest you pick somebody else to model your new serve after. In the meantime, go back to pitty-pat.”

Helen Ingalls frowned. She was an attractive fortyish woman with tied-back blonde hair and crinkly blue eyes. “Don isn’t going to like it.”

“Let him play with Martina. If you take a couple of aspirins before you play and wear an elastic brace, it will cut down on the pain, but that’s all I can do for you except to tell you to forget the cannonball serve.”

Mrs. Ingalls sighed and pulled on her jacket. “I’ll think it over.”

Dr. Hovde left the examination room and walked back to his office in the renovated old house. He went into the washroom and scrubbed his hands at the sink. Out on his desk the telephone buzzed. He dried his hands and walked back to pick it up.

“Yes, Carol?”

“There’s a Dr. Breedlove calling.”

Dr. Hovde was instantly alert when he heard the pathologist’s name. “I’ll talk to him.”

The line clicked and Hovde said, “Hello, Kermit?”

“Hi, Warren. You busy?”

“No more so than usual. What’s up?”

“A customer came in downstairs last night that you might be interested in.”

A knot clenched in Hovde’s stomach. “Who is it?”

“Name’s Edward Frankovich.”

Hovde ran the name through his mental file. Nothing clicked. “I don’t know the name,” he said.

“It’s not him, it’s the place where he died. A house up on

Beachwood Drive. The girl who lives there is Joana Raitt."

"Joana? Is she all right?"

"As far as I know. Just the same, there are some peculiar things about Frankovich's death that I thought you'd be interested in."

"For instance?"

"For instance, the guy seems to have died twice."

There was a moment of silence on the wire before Hovde replied. "Are you going to be around there for a while?"

"Where else would I be?"

"I'll be down as soon as I can. I want to talk to you about this."

Dr. Hovde hung up the phone and sat for a moment pulling on his lower lip. He badly wanted a cigarette. He picked up the receiver again and buzzed the receptionist. "What do we have going for the rest of the afternoon, Carol?" he asked.

The receptionist ran down the list of patients scheduled for afternoon appointments, and their respective complaints. The more urgent cases Hovde arranged to send to a colleague who had a clinic just a block away. The others he told Carol to reschedule wherever possible for later dates.

Dr. Hovde changed from the white jacket into his old tweed and slipped out the back door, leaving Carol to deal with the patients in the waiting room.

It was most unprofessional behavior, he told himself sternly, but the circumstances were extraordinary. The message from Dr. Breedlove had triggered all sorts of unpleasant thoughts, but Hovde forced himself to draw no conclusions until he had all the facts.

It was two o'clock when he pulled into the doctors' parking lot at the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital. He jogged to the Emergency entrance, nodded to the doctors he knew on the ward there, and rode the elevator down to the sub-basement.

The chill of the air crawled in through his clothes as it always did down here. It was an unnatural cold, the cold of a place that has

never been warm. The cold of death. Dr. Hovde hurried past the row of refrigerated drawers to the pathology lab.

Kermit Breedlove sat at a battered old desk in one corner of the room. His chair was tilted back, his long legs stretched out with the feet propped on a pulled-out lower drawer. He was reading a paperback Western. The ever-present toothpick jiggled in a corner of his mouth.

On one of the autopsy tables lay a human form covered with a sheet. Dr. Hovde judged it to be a man, six feet five or six feet six, and about 240 pounds.

"Hello, Kermit," Hovde said. He gestured at the sheeted body. "This the one you told me about?"

Dr. Breedlove turned down a page corner and laid the paperback aside. "That's him." He got up and ambled over to the table where he stood beside Hovde. "I opened him up this morning and found some mighty interesting things inside."

"Can we have a look at him?"

"Sure." The pathologist grasped the sheet at the top of the table. Then he hesitated and said in a tone that was more serious than his usual offhand banter. "This is a bad one, Warren."

Hovde nodded his understanding and stood back to watch while Breedlove peeled away the sheet.

The body was a big man, thick through the waist and powerfully muscled at the chest and shoulders. The Y-shaped autopsy incision across the chest and abdomen had been closed and stitched together. All these details Hovde took in on his second and third impressions. All he could look at when the sheet was stripped away was the man's head. It was battered and crushed like a rotten melon. The face was all askew. All traces of blood had been washed away, and the splintered skull was clearly visible through the lacerated scalp. The brain, Hovde could see, must have bulged through half a dozen fissures before it was removed for the autopsy.

"No need to ask the cause of death on this one," he said.

Breedlove eyed him cagily. "You think not? Would you like to make a little bet?"

Hovde recalled the pathologist's words over the phone: *"The guy seems to have died twice."* He said, "Tell me about it."

"They brought him in about midnight last night. Apparent homicide. When I came in this morning I didn't like the looks of the body at all. And I don't mean the head."

"What *do* you mean?" Hovde prompted.

"The condition of the corpse didn't jibe with the time of death on the report. I don't know why nobody else picked up on it. They probably never looked past the busted-open skull."

"I can understand that," Hovde put in.

"Right away I saw there were signs of postmortem decomposition that wouldn't have been evident until a body was dead at least twenty-four hours. Want me to run over them for you?"

"I know the signs of putrefaction on a dead body." Hovde said.

"Okay. His identity was established through papers he was carrying — driver's license, credit cards, and that stuff. We verified it by checking his fingerprints with the DMV. When we knew there were no close relatives, I cut into him."

Breedlove paused to probe at a molar with the toothpick."

"Kermit, will you get on with it?"

"Sure, sure. When I got inside I found the gastrointestinal evidence and the degree of blood-cell breakdown confirmed what I thought when I first saw him. The guy died some time Friday, and not Sunday night. I don't care how many witnesses there were. Then I remembered the similar case of the crazy woman driver in Westwood, and it occurred to me that the name of the girl in the house was the same as the one the woman almost ran over. Your patient. So I gave you a call."

“I’m glad you did,” Hovde said. He gazed down at the dead man with the long, roughly sewn scar running down the middle of his trunk. “If the blows to the head didn’t kill this man, what did?”

“Suffocation.”

“You’re serious?”

“Serious as the Pope. You can see that the face, what’s left of it, still has the dusky plum color associated with asphyxiation. The organs I took out were cyanotic and congested. There were small hemorrhages in the thymus, lungs, pericardium, and pleura. Internal bruising of the larynx suggests to me that he choked on something he swallowed.”

“No foreign material in the laryngeal aperture?”

“Not when I opened him, but I’ll guarantee something was in there and cut off his air long enough to kill him.”

“On Friday.”

“No later.”

“Do you have the police report handy?”

Dr. Breedlove strolled back to the desk and shuffled through the papers scattered haphazardly across the top. He came up with a carbon copy of the typed police report and handed it to Hovde.

Slipping on his reading glasses, Hovde skimmed through the information in the blocks at the top of the sheet. He confirmed that the apparent homicide did indeed occur at an address on Beachwood Drive occupied by Joana Raitt. He read quickly through the narrative description, then stopped suddenly.

“Glen Early,” he said aloud.

“What’s that?” said Breedlove.

“The ‘assailant’ here, the one who delivered the blows to the head, I know him. He lives in the same apartment complex that I do.”

“Some coincidence.”

“Not really,” said Hovde, more to himself than to the

pathologist. “No coincidence at all.”

He quickly finished reading the report, then went back and read it again more thoroughly.

When he had finished, Hovde laid the report flat on one of the unoccupied autopsy tables and thought about it. This new attack on Joana, following the woman in the car last Thursday, plus the accident in the swimming pool and Joana’s weird story, added up to a conclusion he did not like, but one he could no longer deny. Whatever was going on here was beyond the scope of medicine, or any other of the natural sciences. There was only one possible conclusion. Walking dead people were trying to kill Joana Raitt.

“Peculiar set of circumstances, isn’t it?” said Dr. Breedlove.

“Peculiar, to say the least,” Hovde agreed. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Do? What do you mean do about it?”

“Jesus, Kermit, you’ve got findings here to show that this man, as you put it to me on the telephone, died twice. Same thing with the woman driver last week. Aren’t you going to take this to the Board?”

“Hell no. I don’t want any part of it.”

“How can you say that? This could be one of the biggest medical stories of our time.”

“Yeah, and it could be a great big can of worms. Leave me out.”

“That’s a hell of an attitude.”

“Maybe so, but that’s the way I feel.” The pathologist pretended to get busy with some of the papers on his desk, but when Hovde continued to stare at him he turned back with a sigh of resignation. “Look, Warren, I could take this to the Board, sure. ‘Excuse me,’ I say, ‘I’ve got a couple of people on ice downstairs who appear to have been walking around and doing things for quite some time after they were dead. Then they died again and were

brought in here, and I thought I'd mention it.'

"I see two possible reactions from the Board. One, they fall all over each other laughing, or, two, they schedule me for a rubber room and one of those jackets that buckle in the back. No, make that three possibilities. They might listen to me, believe every word, then tell me to forget it if I want to keep my job here. Don't make waves."

Hovde started to argue, but he realized that what Breedlove said was essentially true. It was an outlandish story to lay on anyone cold. And the Board of Directors of the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital were not the most open-minded of bodies. They put great store in not making waves.

"You could take the story to somebody else," he said. "The newspapers. Television."

Breedlove took the toothpick out of his mouth and spoke seriously. "Warren, I am happy doing what I am doing. Chief Pathologist right here at West L. A. is it for me. I have a nice home and a nice wife and a nice quiet life away from the hospital. I want to continue. I do not want to be a media star."

"All I'm suggesting is that you report what you've found here," Hovde said mildly.

"Can you imagine what Eyewitness News would do with this story? Or the *Herald-Examiner?* Or, God help us, the *National Enquirer?*"

"You've got a point," Hovde admitted.

"I do my job, and I do it well," Breedlove said. "I put my findings in my reports, I pass my reports on through channels. If anybody up the line wants to make something out of them, they're welcome to the whole stinking mess. Do *you* want to make something out of it?"

"No," Hovde said slowly. "I guess I don't."

There was a short, uncomfortable silence between the two

doctors.

"Warren, can I make a suggestion?" Breedlove said.

"Go ahead."

"This friend of yours, this patient, Joana Raitt …"

"Yes?"

"I'd tell her to be damned careful walking past cemeteries."

Hovde regarded the pathologist for a long moment and saw that he was serious. "I'll do that," he said.

He scanned the police report one more time and saw that the case had been assigned to Detective Sergeant Dan Olivares. Hovde knew the name. He had worked with the policeman the year before on a series of grisly rape-murders in the Venice area. The two men had got along well.

He handed the report back to Breedlove. "Thanks for calling me on this, Kermit. Let me know if …" He did not know how to finish the sentence.

"If I get another one?" Breedlove supplied. "I'll be happy to."

Hovde left him there with the corpse and took the elevator back upstairs. He was grateful for the rush of warm air that met him when he stepped out into the hallway. At one of the nurses' stations he used the telephone to call the Police Building in downtown Los Angeles. He asked for Sergeant Olivares in Homicide. The instrument buzzed once and a pleasant baritone answered.

"Olivares."

"Dan, this is Warren Hovde."

"Good to hear from you, Doctor. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. Dan, there's a case you're working on that I'd like to talk to you about."

"What case?"

"Edward Frankovich, homicide victim Sunday night in Hollywood."

“Oh, yeah, that was a messy one. I’ve got the sheet in front of me now. Was he a patient of yours?”

“No, but the girl is. The one who lives in the house where it happened.”

There was a rustle of paper on the other end of the line.

“Joana Raitt,” said Olivares.

“Yes, that’s the girl.”

“It says here her boyfriend, Glen Early, was the one who did Frankovich in.”

“Yes, I know Glen too,” said Hovde.

“I wouldn’t worry about him, if that’s why you called. I don’t think he’s in any trouble. We’ve got an apartment house full of witnesses ready to swear he acted in defense of his life and the girl’s. This Frankovich was clearly freaked out. I make him a psycho or a doper.”

“I’m glad to hear Glen’s in the clear,” Hovde said, “but that’s not all I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Do you have some information?” Suddenly the official tone of the policeman was in Olivares’ voice.

“I’m not sure. Can we get together?”

“Early and the girl are due down here in a little while to enter their statements on the record. Would you like to sit in?”

“I would, if you don’t mind.”

“Come on down. I’ll have a visitor’s badge waiting for you with the guard downstairs.”

Dr. Hovde hung up the phone and walked slowly down the antiseptic corridor and out of the hospital. There was no backing out now, he was in this business with both feet, whether he wanted to be or not. Walking down the steps outside the building, he thought about how simple his life had been just a week ago. All he had to worry about then was sore throats, broken bones, and his impending divorce.

The good old days, he thought sourly, and climbed into his car.

Chapter 16

The Los Angeles Police Building was part of the new municipal complex that flanked the old familiar City Hall. The room assigned to Sergeant Olivares for his interview with Joana Raitt and Glen Early was on the twelfth floor. It was furnished with a short conference table and half a dozen padded vinyl chairs. A window overlooked the Civic Center Mall, where flags of the fifty states hung limp on their poles. The walls of the room were beige, the carpet a dull brown. The only suggestion of personality in the room were the ashtrays, which advertised the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas.

Sergeant Olivares sat on one side of the table, with Joana and Glen across from him. The sergeant was a compact man with smooth black hair, a neat moustache, and wide spaces between his teeth. At the far end of the table sat Warren Hovde, with his chair angled away from the others to show that he had no official role in the proceedings.

Both Glen and Joana looked nervous and glanced frequently at each other for reassurance. Joana smoked rapidly, while Glen chewed at a hangnail on his thumb. Olivares kept the questioning in a quiet, conversational tone. He assured them repeatedly that there would not likely be any charges arising from the death of Edward Frankovich.

“What I’d like,” said Olivares, “is for each of you just to tell in your own words what happened last night, from the time you first saw Frankovich outside the house until the police arrived. If it’s all right with you I’ll record your statements on the machine here, but if you prefer I can call in a stenographer.”

“I have no objection to the tape,” Joana said. Glen nodded his agreement.

“You’ll both have a chance to see the transcript and sign it,” Olivares said. He depressed the record lever on the cassette machine and sat back to let first Joana, then Glen tell their stories of the violent events of Sunday night.

Dr. Hovde sat quietly and listened as the young people spoke. Their voices were low. Their eyes reflected the horror of the experience. Hovde could not suppress a shudder as he reflected on what he knew about the dead man that they did not.

When Joana and Glen had finished their stories, Sergeant Olivares snapped off the cassette recorder. From the floor at his feet he brought up an attaché case. He zipped it open and pulled out an eight-by-ten photograph. It was obviously a blow-up of a black-and-white snapshot. It showed a big smiling man standing self-consciously next to a palm tree. The man wore a plaid shirt and a pair of jeans. There was nothing about him that would draw a second glance in a crowd.

“Do you recognize this man?” Olivares asked.

Joana and Glen studied the photograph briefly, then looked at each other.

“That’s him,” Joana said. “That’s the man. But he looked different last night.”

“Different in what way?”

“He wasn’t smiling, for one thing,” Joana said. “He had kind of a … dazed expression.”

“And his face was darker than it is in the picture,” Glen added. “Almost purple.”

“But you have no doubt this is the man who broke in and attacked you?”

“No doubt,” Joana said.

“I’m not likely to forget that face,” said Glen.

The detective nodded. “Joana, I want you to look at the photograph again and try to remember if you have ever seen this man before he came to your door Sunday night.”

Joana squared the picture on the table in front of her and stared at it. A tiny frown of concentration creased her forehead. “No, I’m sure that was the first time.”

“You never ran across him in your work? Or socially in any way?”

“No.”

“A casual meeting, in a store, or a theater, or a gas station?”

Joana shook her head. “I’m sure I never saw this man before last night.”

“How about you, Glen?”

“He was a stranger to me. I would have remembered a big man like that.”

Olivares sighed. “I really didn’t expect you to know him, but I hoped Joana might have seen him before. She was obviously the one he was after, and it would help if we could make some connection.”

Joana shivered suddenly. Glen reached over and gave her hand a squeeze.

“Have you made any enemies, Joana?” the sergeant continued. “Made anybody mad enough so they might want to hurt you?”

“Oh, no,” Joana said emphatically. “I’ve had my differences with people from time to time, but never anything serious. Surely nothing that would lead to this … no, it’s not possible.”

Olivares wrote something in a pocket-size notebook, then looked up and smiled pleasantly. “That about does it. Thanks for coming in.”

“That’s all there is?” Joana asked. “We can go now?”

“Sure.”

Joana and Glen stood up and walked around the table to the

door. Joana looked back at Dr. Hovde, a question in her eyes.

"I'm going to stick around and talk to the sergeant for a while," the doctor said.

"We're old friends," Olivares explained.

"Will we be seeing you later, Doctor?" Glen asked.

"I'll call you this evening. I'd like the three of us to have a talk."

The young couple said quick goodbyes and left, obviously anxious to be out of the oppressively bland room.

When they were gone, Sergeant Olivares slid the photograph over in front of Hovde. "What do you think, Doc?"

Hovde looked down at the fuzzy image of the big, smiling man with the guileless face. "From what I saw at the hospital, I couldn't swear this is the same man."

"It's him, all right. We got the photo from his landlady. It was taken a year ago when the two of them were dating each other. That's been over now for months, according to the landlady."

"Who is he, anyway, Dan?"

Olivares pulled several stapled sheets out of the attaché case. "Edward David Frankovich," he read. "Born Muskegon, Michigan, March 1, 1931. Served in the army during the Korean War, discharged with rank of corporal. Purple Heart. Married in 1958, divorced 1959. Employed past four years at McCoy's Auto Repair on Figueroa. Lived alone in Huntington Park. No close relatives, no close friends, no arrest record outside of routine traffic citations."

"Not much to sum up a man's life," Hovde said.

"At the end, what do any of our lives add up to?" Olivares said.

"Is there any history of mental illness?"

"We didn't turn up any."

"Too bad."

"Why?"

"Because then we'd have some kind of explanation for his

weird behavior."

"Yeah." Olivares sat looking at the doctor. "You said you might have some information for me."

"It's more in the nature of a suggestion," Hovde said. "And I'm not quite ready to make it yet. What's your next move?"

"I'm going out to the garage where Frankovich worked and talk to his boss."

"Mind if I come along?"

"It's all right with me." Olivares gathered up the cassette recorder, the photograph of Frankovich, and the stapled-together report sheets and shoved them into the attaché case. He looked up at Hovde. "Can I ask you something, Doc?"

"Go ahead."

"What's so special about this homicide? Why should a doctor take half a day off from his practice to follow a detective around?"

Hovde thought a moment before answering. "I've got myself involved with these young people, Dan, without trying to, and without really wanting to. It's like the old Oriental custom that says when you save somebody's life you're responsible for that person forever afterward."

"Did you save the girl's life?"

"I'm not sure."

"What kind of an answer is that?"

"It's an evasive answer, Dan, and I'm sorry. Let's go on out to where Frankovich worked, then I'll try to tell you about it."

• • •

McCoy's Auto Repair occupied a lot on a cluttered block of Figueroa. On one side was a wholesale plumbing supply house; on the other was an abandoned Gulf station with weeds growing up through cracks in the asphalt. Sergeant Olivares parked the unmarked police car next to the dead gas pumps and got out. Dr.

Hovde followed.

They walked up behind a skinny blonde youth who was up to his elbows in the engine of a battered old Chevrolet.

"Where can we find the boss?" Olivares said.

"Inside," said the boy without looking up. He pointed a greasy elbow toward a low cinder-block building that seemed to overflow with broken-down automobiles.

"Thanks," Olivares grunted, and led the way into the building.

Inside, a badly tuned engine was being gunned and eased with a machine-gun popping of backfires. Above the din a man's voice could be heard shouting. Olivares and the doctor followed the voice and found a short fat man with a sweaty bald head confronting a frightened-looking dark-eyed boy. The bald man waved his stubby arms up and down to emphasize his words.

"Goddamn it, don't you understand a simple fucking parts order? Are you so fucking stupid you don't know a head gasket from a rocker-arm gasket? Jesus, no wonder you people haven't got fucking shit." He paused in his tirade to acknowledge Olivares and Dr. Hovde. "Yeah?"

"You the boss here?" Olivares said. "My name's McCoy, and that's the name on the sign, so I guess that makes me the boss."

"Like to talk to you."

"Just a minute." He returned his attention to the boy, whose eyes darted around as though searching for an escape. "Now get your ass over to the fucking parts house and this time come back with the right fucking gasket. Comprenday?"

The boy bobbed his head up and down, and with an embarrassed glance at the other two men, he hurried out.

McCoy pulled a crusty handkerchief from the pocket of his coveralls and ran it over his glistening scalp. "Stupid fucking Mexicans," he said. "You can't teach them shit. Come up here and take our welfare and spray-paint their fucking names all over our

property, but just try and get one of them to do a day's work. They're born lazy and they die lazy."

"That so?" said Sergeant Olivares. "Here's my identification." He flapped open his wallet to show McCoy the L.A.P.D. badge and I.D. card. He held it out long enough to be sure the fat man had time to read his name.

"Uh — look, nothing personal, Sergeant. I wasn't talking about all Mexicans. Hell, some of them are fine people. I mean, I've had Mexicans over to my place for dinner …"

Olivares let the man run down, then said, "Forget it. Is there someplace where we can talk?"

"Yeah, sure," said McCoy, eager to please now. "We can go in the office."

The "office" was a plywood cubicle sectioned off from one corner of the garage. It had a high counter with an old hand-crank adding machine and a litter of bills and invoices. A single high stool stood behind the counter. Taped to the walls were poster-size calendars from parts manufacturers that featured glossy 1940s-style pin-ups.

"Things are hectic around here today," McCoy said. "My best mechanic got himself knocked off last night, and I have to make do with these stupid — " he broke off and glanced at Olivares. "I have to get along with temporary help."

"Your mechanic was Edward Frankovich?" the detective said.

"Yeah."

"That's what we want to talk to you about."

McCoy looked relieved. "There was already a couple of cops here this morning. They told me what happened to him. You could of knocked me over with a feather. Who'd of thought a thing like that would happen to Big Ed? That's what we called him, Big Ed, on account of his size."

"Would you say he was a violent man?" Olivares asked. "Did he

have a temper?"

"Big Ed? Hell no. He didn't have a violent bone in his body. Smiled a lot, didn't have much to say. He was a damned good worker. Never sick, never came in late. You could of knocked me over with a feather."

"Did you ever hear him mention the name Joana Raitt?" Olivares asked.

"Nah. But then, he never talked much about his personal life. He didn't have much of a personal life, if you ask me. He did his work. That's all I care about in a man." McCoy mopped the perspiration from his head again. "And now he's dead. That's a funny coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"For a while I thought he was a goner last Friday, right in front of my eyes."

Dr. Hovde felt a chill between his shoulder blades. "What happened?" he said.

McCoy looked at Hovde as though seeing him for the first time, then switched his eyes back to Olivares.

"He's with me," the detective said. "Go ahead and answer the question."

"Well, what happened, we was eating lunch out in the back, me and Big Ed. We had sandwiches that we bought off the caterer's truck. There's no place around here where you can buy a decent sandwich. All they got is tacos and that shit." He glanced suddenly at Olivares, cleared his throat, and went on. "Anyhow, all of a sudden I hear Ed go 'Hut!' like that, and I look over to see him floppin' his head around with his eyes bugged out to here. At first I thought he was havin' some kind of a fit, then his face starts turning blue and I know what's happened. He swallowed something and got it caught in his throat. I ran over and pounded him on the back, but it didn't do no good. He kind of staggered around the yard out back,

grabbin' at his throat, and all the time gettin' blacker in the face. Then all of a sudden he goes down, *whop*, like a sack of potatoes.

"I got down next to him and I seen he ain't breathin' at all. I felt for his heartbeat and didn't get nothing. I said to myself, 'Oh, shit, this guy is dead or damn close to it.' I ran around to the front and got a couple of the guys to come back with me. When we got out there I'm damned if Big Ed ain't on his feet and walkin' around."

"He was all right?" Hovde asked.

"I didn't say that. He was up on his feet, but he sure as hell didn't look good. His face still had that purplish color, and his eyes didn't seem to quite look at you, if you know what I mean. I asked him if he was okay, and he said yeah in a funny voice."

"Funny in what way?" said Hovde.

McCoy shrugged his meaty shoulders. "Thin, kind of. Flat. like it was just coming from his mouth, not his chest. Anyway, I didn't like the way he looked at all, so I said why don't he take the rest of the day off. He said yeah again, and just walked out. Didn't even take his toolbox. I yelled 'See you Monday,' after him, but he didn't answer. I never saw him again."

Dr. Hovde looked over and saw that Olivares was watching his face. "That's all I have," he said.

The sergeant turned to the garage owner. "That's it for now, Mr. McCoy." He handed over a card with his name and telephone extension. "If you think of anything else, give me a call."

"Absolutely, Sergeant. I've always been ready to cooperate with the police."

"Sure you have," said Olivares. He turned and walked out of the building. Dr. Hovde followed.

When they were back in the car, Olivares sat behind the steering wheel and watched Hovde expectantly. He said, "All right, Doc, I saw how you picked up on it when the fat boy told us how

Frankovich choked on his sandwich Friday. You ready to let me in on it?"

Hovde squirmed in his seat. "I don't know quite how to say this."

"Just put it in simple, elementary English. Something a Mexican cop can understand."

Hovde laughed, but without mirth. "All right, here it is. What would you say if I told you Ed Frankovich actually died last Friday out in back of McCoy's garage when he choked on that sandwich?"

Olivares peered at him with lowered lids. "I'd say you are making a very bad joke."

"No joke," Hovde said. "You asked me, I told you. From what I've seen it's my opinion that Ed Frankovich was a dead man Friday afternoon."

"Uh-huh. And who, in your opinion, was it that broke into Joana Raitt's house Sunday night and got his brains beat out?"

Dr. Hovde shifted uncomfortably. "Ed Frankovich. Same guy."

"Kind of an unusual situation," said Olivares drily. "Suppose you explain to this Mexican cop how such a thing could happen."

"I can't explain it," Hovde admitted. "I can only tell you that last night Joana Raitt was attacked by a dead man."

"Oh, shit," Olivares said in a groan.

"I know how it sounds, Dan, believe me. But the pathologist's findings at my hospital will bear out what I said. Frankovich died of asphyxiation, and he had been dead more than forty-eight hours when he was brought in late Sunday."

Olivares pinched his eyes together the way a man does when he feels a headache coming on.

"And there was another one," Hovde continued, unable to stop now. "A woman who almost drove her car into Joana last Thursday. The autopsy showed that the woman had died hours before the accident. I talked to her husband, and he confirmed that there was

an accident with an electric hair dryer that could have killed her. She was already dead when she steered her car at the girl."

Olivares held up a hand. "Hold it."

"You wanted to hear."

"Okay, so now I've heard. And what I am going to do next is forget what I've heard. My advice to you is to do the same."

"I can't forget it, Dan, I'm involved."

"If you are, I'm sorry for you. I don't want any part of it."

"But you're a policeman."

"That's the point exactly, I'm a policeman. What I've got here is a simple case of homicide. Justifiable homicide, from the looks of it. My report will go in with the recommendation that no charges be filed."

"Aren't you even curious about what happened?"

"I *know* what happened, Doc. An ordinary guy went berserk. Happens every day. He attacked a citizen, got chilled by the citizen's boyfriend. Simple and straightforward."

"But — "

Olivares cut him off. "I don't know anything about any walking dead men, and I don't want to know anything about walking dead men."

Hovde subsided. "I kind of thought you'd feel that way."

Sergeant Olivares gave him a long, guarded look, then put the car in gear and took off.

Chapter 17

Dr. Hovde was waiting at the door when Joana and Glen arrived. The doctor's apartment, like Glen's, was a one-bedroom with a compact kitchen, tile bathroom, and breakfast bar. Unlike Glen's, which reflected the occupant's personality in a kind of organized disarray, Warren Hovde's apartment was as sterile and unlived-in-looking as the day he had moved in. Most of his personal things were still in the house with Marge. There was no place to put them here. Nor did he have any interest in making the place more homelike. At best, he could only think of the Marina Village as extremely temporary.

Glen and Joana came in and sat down on the sofa. Dr. Hovde opened a cold bottle of Heineken's for each of them.

"How's the head feeling, Glen?" he asked.

Glen reached back and gingerly touched the lump where his head had struck the wall beam during the battle at Joana's house. "Tender, but it's no problem."

"That's good. How about you, Joana, are you sleeping all right?"

"Well enough. I wake up with a start two or three times a night, but I've been able to get back to sleep with no trouble."

"Good. If you think you need a sedative, I'll write you a prescription."

"I'm all right," Joana said. She caught and held the doctor's eyes. "But you didn't invite us here tonight to get a medical report."

Hovde gave them an embarrassed smile. "No, I didn't. I was sort of easing into what I really want to talk about. This isn't easy

for me. I've been a doctor too long. I am comfortable with broken bones and bedsores and fever charts, but I am now going to have to admit that we're faced with something here that they didn't teach us about in med school."

"Did you say 'we'?" Joana asked.

Dr. Hovde nodded slowly. "Believe me, it is not my habit to involve myself in other people's personal lives. For a doctor that would be disastrous. But this … this is different. It's too close to me to ignore. Besides, Joana, I feel I owe you."

"Owe me? I don't understand."

"You came to me last week after your accident in the swimming pool. You had a bizarre story to tell, and you badly needed someone to listen to you. I listened, all right, but I didn't really hear you. The symptoms you described did not fit any known physical ailment, so I rejected them. Wrote them off as hallucinations. I sent you away with platitudes and a prescription for tranquilizers. That wasn't the kind of help you needed."

"What are you getting at, Doctor?" Glen said.

"In a moment," said Hovde. "Meantime, it would help if you both would call me Warren. Then I wouldn't feel so professorial."

They gave him brief smiles of assent.

"The first thing we should recognize," he continued, "is that Joana is in danger. Mortal danger."

"Even now?" Glen said.

"As far as we know. There have been two incidents already, and to be on the safe side we'd better assume there will be more."

"Excuse me," Glen said, "but I seem to be a couple of beats out of synch. What incidents?"

"The two attempts on Joana's life — Thursday afternoon, and again Sunday night."

"The woman in the car was no accident, was it?" Joana said.

"No. With what I've learned since then, I can assure you it was

no accident."

"Explain that, Warren," Glen said.

"I will in a minute, but first consider the man who attacked Sunday night. There's no question that he was after Joana."

"No argument on that," Glen said. "He wasn't interested in me at all. All he wanted was to put me out of the way so he could get at Joana."

"Exactly. That makes two attempts on Joana's life in four days. Until we know exactly what we're up against, we've got to assume there will be more."

"Well, damn it, what are we supposed to do?" Glen demanded. "I already killed one man."

"No you didn't," Hovde said.

There was a long moment during which no one spoke. Laughter from outside on the tennis court filtered in with the cool June air.

"Warren, I killed that man Frankovich," Glen said. "I hit him with a poker as hard as I could maybe a dozen times. I saw his skull break. I could have killed him with any one of those blows."

"That's the point," Hovde said. "Any single blow like that might have killed a normal person. The autopsy report confirmed that."

Glen's forehead creased in a puzzled frown. "But then …"

"You were hitting a dead man," Hovde told him.

Glen stared. Joana sat quietly, waiting for the doctor to go on.

"The autopsy on Frankovich was done at my hospital. So was the one on Mrs. Carlson, the woman in the car last Thursday. In both cases the time of death was established as being many hours before witnesses saw them fall."

"Do the police know about this?" Glen asked.

"They don't want to know. I tried telling Sergeant Olivares. He's an intelligent, capable man, but first and foremost, he is a policeman. When I started talking about walking dead people, he

tuned me out. And I can't honestly say I blame him. There is no procedure to follow in a case like that, and policemen have to be very careful about improvising these days."

"But … what does it mean?" Glen asked. "What the hell is going on?"

"I wish I knew," said Hovde. "All I can say for sure is that these … *walkers* were dead when they attacked Joana."

"It has something to do with what happened to me last week in the swimming pool, doesn't it?" Joana said. "The tunnel, the watchers along the walls, the voice that didn't want to let me come back."

"That I can't answer," Hovde said. "Nothing in my experience equips me for speculating on things outside the normal."

"It's crazy," Glen said. "It doesn't compute. But for the moment, let's say that is what's happening. Dead people, *walkers*, as you call them, are somehow, and for some reason, attacking Joana." He stopped and grinned without humor. "Jesus, it's even hard for me to say that aloud."

"That will give you an idea of the trouble we'd have convincing the police."

"I see what you mean. So the question now is where do we go from here? We can't just sit around and wait for another one of these zombies to make a move."

"No, we can't do that," Hovde agreed. "And I have a suggestion. That's why I asked both of you to come here tonight."

When he fell silent for a moment, Joana said, "What is it, Warren?"

Hovde grinned crookedly. "Like Glen, I find it difficult to say this aloud. What it amounts to, there's someone I want you to meet. She's a nurse at the West Los Angeles Hospital."

"A nurse?" Glen said. "What good can a nurse do us?"

"Let him finish, Glen," Joana said quietly.

“She’s an intelligent girl, and a truly dedicated nurse,” Hovde continued, “but it’s not in that capacity that she can help us.”

“What, then?” Glen said impatiently.

“She has, well, I guess you could call it an occult connection.”

“What is she, a witch?”

“It’s not the girl herself, it’s her grandmother. I’ve heard her talk about the old lady and some of the strange powers she has.” He gave a little snort of laughter. “I always thought it was foolishness. But that was before.”

Joana grew thoughtful, and the doctor looked at her questioningly.

“What is it?”

“Talking about the occult reminded me, Peter Landau never did show up Sunday night. On the telephone he sounded really excited. Said he had learned something important. Then, with everything that happened that night, I forgot all about him until just now. I wonder why I haven’t heard from him.”

“Never mind him,” Glen said, “he probably found another party to go to. There’s no way he could help us with his astrological parlor tricks.”

“All the same, I wonder about him.”

“So what about this old lady, Warren?” Glen said. “The one with the power?”

“I don’t know any more than I’ve already told you,” Hovde said. “If you’ll agree, we can drive out and I’ll introduce you to the nurse. Maybe she can put you in touch with her grandmother.”

“It’s worth a try,” Joana said.

“What have we got to lose?” Glen added.

Joana frowned and Glen looked at her. “Is something wrong?”

“You just reminded me of something Peter said. I know he was kidding around at first, but I think he really wanted to help.”

“I know,” Glen said more gently. “If we haven’t heard anything

in the next couple of days, we'll look him up."

Joana smiled at him. Then to Dr. Hovde she said, "You say we can meet this nurse tonight?"

Hovde consulted his watch. "She'll be on her break at the hospital in twenty minutes. That would be the best time to talk to her."

"We can take my car," Glen said. "I'll go get the keys."

Glen went out, and they heard him jog off around the building toward his own apartment. Joana leaned forward on the sofa and searched the doctor with her eyes.

"Warren, will you tell me something honestly?"

"If I can."

"Did I really drown in that pool last week? Did I die?"

"What do you mean, Joana?"

"I mean, what if I really don't belong here? What if coming back was a mistake? If they, the walkers, have a real claim on me, maybe I'm just hurting other people by trying to stay where I shouldn't be. You, Glen, Peter, all of you are mixed up in something that could be deadly dangerous because of me."

"I don't know how to answer you, Joana. As for involving the rest of us, we're all acting of our own free will."

"That night of the party here, you saw my … my body. Just tell me, was I dead?"

Dr. Hovde was silent for a moment, then he said, "When I saw you, after they had pulled you out of the pool and Glen was working over you, my first thought was that you were gone."

Joana winced.

"But there are many, many documented cases where the vital signs were negative, where the patient was actually given up for dead, and yet revived and lived out a normal lifetime. Another thing I can assure you of, there is no record anywhere of anybody who was really and truly dead coming back to life. I don't think you

have, either. If there was a mistake made, the other side made it, whoever they are. You're alive, Joana, as alive as any of us. You belong here, and we'll fight this out together to see that you stay here."

Impulsively Joana got up and came over to kiss the doctor lightly on the cheek. She said. "Thanks, Warren, for reminding me how dear life is, and how really lucky I am to have such friends."

The door opened and Glen came in jiggling the car keys. "All set."

Joana and the doctor followed him out to the Camaro.

• • •

The cafeteria on the second floor of the West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital was roomy, efficient, and impersonal. Baskets of plastic flowers had been placed on the Formica-topped tables in a vain attempt to warm up the room. Doctors, nurses, and night-shift employees drifted in, ordered coffee, a roll, a sandwich, and hurried out. It was not an atmosphere that encouraged people to linger.

At a table off to one side sat Joana, Glen, and Dr. Hovde. They had heavy white mugs of coffee in front of them, which they ignored, keeping their eyes on the entrance.

"Here she comes now," said Hovde.

A girl with clear olive skin and eyes like black coffee came into the cafeteria. She wore a white nylon nurses's uniform that moved with her small, well-proportioned body. She stood inside the doorway for a moment, looking around.

"Over here, Ynez," said Dr. Hovde.

She recognized him and came toward the table. Her smile was warm and honest.

Dr. Hovde rose and made the introductions. "Glen, Joana, this is the lady I was telling you about, Ynez Villanueva. Ynez, these are my friends, Joana Raitt and Glen Early."

“I’m happy to meet you,” said Ynez. Her voice held just a trace of musical Spanish.

“Can I get you something?” Hovde asked. “A cup of coffee?”

The nurse shook her head. “I never drink hospital coffee. Too much of it can dissolve your stomach lining.”

They laughed easily and Ynez sat down at the table. She looked expectantly at Hovde.

“I appreciate your coming, Ynez,” he said. “I’ve heard you speak several times of your grandmother. My friends may need her help.”

The dark girl looked first at Glen, then Joana. Her gaze lingered for a moment, and a shadow crossed her face. Then she turned to Dr. Hovde.

“I thought you did not believe the stories of my grandmother.”

“I’m not sure what I believe in anymore,” Hovde said. “One thing is sure, I’m not as quick to deny that things are possible just because they’re outside my experience.”

“‘More things in heaven and earth,’ eh, Doctor?” said Ynez with a soft smile.

“Something like that.”

The nurse nodded, then looked quickly at Joana. “It is you who are in trouble, is it not?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“In my family, the Villaneuvas, each of us has a touch of the power, some greater, some less. My mother always knew one or two days before it happened when one of us children was going to get sick or hurt ourselves in some way. It tortured her that she could do nothing to prevent it. My brother, when he was younger and would concentrate very hard, could make a ball roll off a table just by willing it so.”

“And you, Ynez?” Joana asked.

“I sometimes see things in people’s faces. Secrets they do not

know are there. But that is all I can do. None of us truly has the power. None but my grandmother."

"Would it be possible to meet her?"

"Are you sure this is what you want? My grandmother will see very few people anymore, and those she does see are often sorry afterwards. They ask her questions, beg for the answers, and when my grandmother tells them what they want to know, they may wish they had never asked. *Bruja*, some call her. Witch."

"Ynez, I'm desperate," Joana said. "Maybe your grandmother can help me, maybe she can't. I don't know. I have nowhere else to turn."

Ynez studied Joana's face. Her coffee-colored eyes showed deep compassion. "I will speak to her, Joana, but you must not have your hopes too high. My grandmother has been badly used by people, and she can be very bitter. Now she only sits alone in her room and waits to die. But I will speak to her of you. I will do what I can."

"Thank you," Joana said with feeling.

"Where can I reach you when I have talked to my grandmother?"

Joana borrowed a notebook from Glen and wrote down her home and office telephone numbers. Ynez took the slip of paper, folded it, and put it away.

Joana touched the other girl's hand. "Ynez, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your helping me."

The nurse's dark eyes were grave. "I have done nothing for you yet. My grandmother may refuse to see you. And even if she agrees, you may wish she hadn't."

"I'll take the chance," Joana said.

Ynez looked at her with a sad smile, then nodded as though she'd heard what she expected. "Be careful, Joana," she said. "Be very careful." Then she rose from the table and walked away without looking back.

Chapter 18

The next day Joana had a difficult time keeping her mind on her work. She made careless mistakes in routine tasks, forgot appointments, and had to keep asking people to repeat what they had just said to her. Just before lunch John Waldo, the manager of her department, ambled over and sat on her desk. He was a tall man with narrow hips and a gunfighter moustache. In the office he wore Western shirts and faded denims. The personnel of the advertising department, being "creative" and therefore a little strange, were given more latitude in dress than others in the corporate family. A touch of eccentricity was expected here, even encouraged. John Waldo's personal idiosyncrasy was impersonating the Marlboro man.

"How you doin', little gal?" he drawled.

"Okay. Well, not so okay, really. I'm not completely with it today."

"Shucks, I guess I can understand that. When some crazy galoot busts into your house, and then you got to go through a lot of palaver with the police, why, no wonder you're shook up."

"That's no excuse for messing up the job the way I am today."

"Don't worry about it, the back-to-school campaign is roped and branded, and we've got a breather until we have to saddle up for the Thanksgiving sale. Why don't you take the rest of the day off if you want to. Heck, take the rest of the week. You've got sick leave coming."

"Thanks, John, but I really feel a lot better here than I would at home. I need people around me." *Live* people, she might have

added, but did not.

"Whatever you say, gal. If you haven't any plans for chow, how about comin' along with me to Dominick's?"

"Thanks, but I'm going to be eating in today. I'm expecting an important phone call, and I wouldn't want to miss it."

The manager pushed himself off the desk and hitched up his denims. "If there's any little thing I can do for you, Joana, just give a shout and I'll come a-runnin'."

"Thanks, John, I appreciate that."

Joana watched the Wilshire Boulevard cowboy mosey back toward his own office. She knew it was not easy for him or any of the others to know what to say to her. There was an accepted way to treat people who had been ill, or in an accident, or suffered a death in the family. You could go by the book. But what did you say to somebody who had barely escaped an attack by a maniac, watched her boyfriend kill the man, and spent several hours being questioned by the police?

At lunchtime Joana went out to the catering wagon that served her floor and bought a tuna-salad sandwich, an apple, and a half-pint carton of milk. She took them back to her desk and ate while trying to concentrate on a sheaf of competitors' newspaper ads. She waited nervously for the phone to ring.

Joana knew she was probably staking too much on Ynez Villanueva's grandmother. She was, after all, just an old woman who was said to have undefined psychic powers that Joana would have scoffed at until very recently. But now there seemed to be no other help available to get her out of this nightmare. So she sat tense, waiting for the call from Ynez.

It was three o'clock when the phone on her desk finally rang. Joana jumped as though it had bitten her.

"Joana? This is Ynez Villanueva. Am I interrupting your work?"

"No. I've been waiting for your call."

“I talked to my grandmother a little while ago. She has no telephone, so I had to call the man downstairs to get her. He was not very happy about it.”

“What happened?” Joana tried to keep the terrible eagerness out of her voice.

“As I thought, she did not want to see you. I told you she sees nobody anymore. But I talked to her and talked to her. I told her, forgive me, that you were an old and dear friend of mine. Finally she agreed to let you come and talk to her, but just the one time, and just for a few minutes.”

“That’s wonderful, Ynez, I can’t thank you enough. Where does she live?”

Ynez gave her an address in Boyle Heights. Joana wrote it on her desk calendar pad and tore off the sheet.

“I’ll go there tonight,” she said, “right after I get off work.”

“No,” said Ynez abruptly. “My grandmother will not talk to you tonight.”

“But why?”

“That I cannot tell you. She has strange ways, and I never question them.”

The disappointment Joana felt was all out of proportion. She struggled for control. “When can I see her, then?”

“Tomorrow will suit my grandmother. After sundown. That is when she agreed to talk to you, and no other time.”

“Tomorrow,” Joana repeated. “Must I go alone, or is it all right to take somebody along?”

“She said nothing about that. I think it will be all right to take Glen.”

“Did you tell her what it is I want to see her about?” Joana said.

“I told her nothing. My grandmother needs no one to tell her things like that.”

"I see. Well, thank you again, Ynez. I'm really grateful."

"I hope you still feel that way after you have talked to my grandmother."

There was a click on the line and the telephone went dead in Joana's hand. Thoughtfully she cradled the instrument. For a moment she wanted to laugh out loud at the crazy scenario she was acting out. Here she was sitting at her everyday desk in her familiar office, talking on her own business phone, and making an appointment to visit a witch.

After sundown. Marvelous. Why not make it at midnight with a full moon? Better yet, with an electrical storm booming and crashing around the witch's old house on a craggy mountain top.

With an effort Joana got hold of herself. The urge to laugh was uncomfortably close to hysteria. She immersed herself in her work and managed to get through the next two hours. At five o'clock she called Glen and told him what Ynez had said.

"What the hell is wrong with seeing the old lady today?" he demanded. "Why do we have to wait till tomorrow?"

"I don't know," Joana said. "Ynez says that's the way her grandmother wants it, and she's the one making the rules."

"Yeah, I suppose she is," Glen conceded. "It's just that I hate knowing you may be in danger and not being able to do something about it."

"I know," Joana said, "I'm frustrated too, but we're doing all we can."

"I'm still not happy about it. What about tonight? Do you want to come to my place?"

"What I'd really like to do tonight is go out," Joana said. "I don't like the feeling of hiding away behind locked doors."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"I was home Sunday night. How safe was that?"

"You've got a point," Glen admitted. "Where would you like to

go?”

“Tell you what, I’ll take you out. It will be your birthday dinner. We can go to Seacliff. You always liked the lobster there.”

“My birthday isn’t until next month.”

“So what? I feel like celebrating it tonight. You may not get another offer, so what do you say?”

“You’re on,” Glen said.

• • •

Three hours later they were driving north on Pacific Coast Highway. They passed the funky beach houses of Topanga and the moneyed colony of Malibu, and climbed the cliffs above Pepperdine University where the mountains marched right down to the sea. They drove by the blackened skeleton of an unfinished condominium, victim of one of the devastating brush fires that sweep annually through the California hills. A group of scruffy young people now lived in the burned-out shell. Throwbacks to an earlier decade, the last of the flower children.

Sitting erect in the bucket seat, both hands on the wheel, Glen did not have much to say. Although he had made adjustments to his thinking to accommodate the changing times, he was still not comfortable with a woman taking him out to dinner, instead of the other way around. Joana knew this, and she knew that taking her car too would be crowding him, so she agreed to ride with him in the Camaro. In truth, she did not much like driving, so it was an easy compromise to make.

The Seacliff Restaurant was perched on a rocky promontory where the winds converged and turned the sea below into a foaming caldron. The Seacliff was famous for its huge lobsters, for which they charged outrageous prices, and for serving the best margaritas north of Puerto Vallarta. The building was gray stone and driftwood to match the cliff, the view on a clear day was

spectacular. Geologists issued periodic warnings that sooner or later the point on which the restaurant stood would break away from the land and send the Seacliff tumbling fifty feet to the rocks and smashing surf below. Californians, however, living in a land undercut by earthquake faults, pay little attention to the doom prophets. The restaurant enjoyed a booming business.

A little before nine o'clock Glen and Joana pulled into the Seacliff parking lot. They left the car with a red-jacketed attendant and went inside. The table they were given was away from the long window that overlooked the ocean, but tonight they did not care. They had seen the view before, and there were other things on their minds.

Glen ordered a broiled lobster tail, Joana decided on the succulent red snapper. They each sipped on one of the famous margaritas while waiting for the food.

Glen maintained a kind of petulant silence. He frowned more openly than usual when Joana lit a cigarette. She heard herself talking too loud and too fast, to compensate.

Finally she said, "Glen, this is supposed to be for your birthday. Couldn't you try to celebrate a little?"

"Sorry. It's not easy to be a barrel of fun just three days after bashing a man's brains out."

"Come on, we made a deal we weren't going to talk about that tonight."

"Sure. Keep it light and frivolous, right? Pretend everything is fun-fun-fun, and we don't have to give a thought to when the next walker is going to come out of the crowd and go for you."

"Cut it *out*," Joana said. It came out more sharply than she had intended. Glen blinked and said no more.

They ate their salads, crisp greens with a wine-vinegar dressing, in any uneasy silence. The waiter appeared promptly to remove their empty salad plates and to serve the main course with

an appropriate flourish. When he was gone, Glen reached across the table and touched Joana's hand.

"Honey, I'm a drag tonight, and I'm sorry. This is a terrific birthday, even a month ahead of time, and from here on I am going to enjoy the hell out of it. Okay?"

She smiled at him, but her eyes were troubled. "I understand, darling. There's no use pretending the strain isn't there, because it is. Maybe coming here tonight was a bad idea."

"No way. It was a wonderful idea, and we are going to have a wonderful time. Tomorrow we can deal with the walkers. We'll go see the witch lady and get exorcised, or whatever it takes. Tonight we have fun."

They shared a bottle of Pinot Chardonnay with their dinners, and by the time the waiter came with coffee they were laughing together easily and naturally. Glen even managed a small joke when Joana took out her Master Charge to pay for the dinner.

They walked out to the parking lot holding hands like teen-agers.

"Honey, this was really a sweet idea," Glen said. "I do love you a lot."

"Still want to marry me?"

"More than ever."

Joana squeezed his hand and felt a rush of tenderness for the young engineer. Somehow his moodiness earlier in the evening, the evidence that he was less than perfect, made her love him all the more. She did not want to spend her life with a flawless hero, she wanted a flesh-and-blood man who could be wrong, and who could admit it.

Out over the ocean the clouds rearranged themselves and the moon came into view. It was fat and orange as a harvest-time pumpkin.

"Oh, Glen, look at that," she said.

“Spectacular,” he agreed.

“Let’s walk over for a minute and look.”

Glen told the parking attendant to hold the car, and he and Joana walked over close to the edge of the cliff and stood by the guard rail looking at the moon.

“What is it that makes the moon so romantic?” Joana wondered aloud.

“Maybe because it rhymes with so many words in romantic songs. June, spoon, soon, lagoon.”

“Buffoon,” Joana offered, laughing.

“Macaroon.”

“Baboon.”

“Spittoon.”

By now they were both laughing and holding onto each other. Suddenly Joana pulled back and gave a little sigh of exasperation.

“What is it?” Glen asked.

“I just thought of something.” She opened her little clutch bag and looked inside. “Yes, I did, damn it, I left my credit card back there in the restaurant.”

“I’ll go get it,” Glen said. “You wait here and think up some more moon rhymes.”

Glen left her with a kiss and walked on back toward the entrance to the restaurant. Joana turned again toward the sea. Standing there alone, she saw the moon differently than when Glen was there to share it. The bland, expressionless face seemed somehow menacing. There was something about it that made her uncomfortable. Something dead.

She was about to go after Glen when there was a wild, high-pitched scream from the direction of the parking lot. Joana spun around and froze. Running toward her, bare feet slapping the asphalt, was a tall, thin girl in a filmy white dress. In the moonlight, Joana could see clearly the dead white face, the gaping mouth, the

glittering eyes.

Seized by panic, Joana turned and ran along the cliff by the guard rail, away from the restaurant. Behind her she could hear the slap-slap of the girl's feet and a high, tragic-sounding wail. It was like a familiar nightmare. Running, Joana fought to get her breath. Behind her, the girl in the white dress gained.

Joana stole a look over her shoulder. She could see the moonlight reflected in the girl's staring eyes. The clawed fingers reached toward her. In an instant of flashback Joana saw the people who stood in the shadows along the walls of the frightful tunnel, reaching for her, reaching to pull her back.

"No!" Joana cried. "Oh, no! God, no!" She ran, stumbling, past the spot where the guard rail ended, and along the unprotected lip of the cliff. Far behind her, shouts came from the direction of the restaurant. She thought she recognized Glen's voice, but it was too late. They would never catch up in time to help her. Too late, too late.

Something gave way beneath her foot. A heel had broken off her shoe. Forced into a limping, staggering gait, Joana could no longer keep ahead of her pursuer. She turned and braced herself as best she could to meet the assault of the wild-eyed girl.

With a cry that was like nothing human, the girl was upon her, grasping, scratching, tearing. Joana fought back, lashing out with her fists, but the blows she landed had no effect. The girl possessed unnatural strength.

Despite her struggles, Joana felt herself being forced step by step closer to the cliff. The girl's face, white and damp, was pressed close to hers. Joana could smell her fetid breath.

With a desperate effort, Joana wrenched herself free for a moment. Something tore. The girl rocked for a moment off balance, holding the front panel of Joana's silk blouse in her two clenched hands. The sound of shouts and running feet was suddenly loud as

Glen and others from the restaurant pounded up to where Joana and the girl stood.

For an endless moment the girl swayed on the lip of the cliff, then in ghastly slow motion she went over.

Instinctively Joana turned away, but she could not shut out the fading, wailing cry and the thudding impact as the girl's body hit the rocks below and bounced lifeless into the roiling sea.

Glen was with her then, holding her tightly. He stripped off his jacket and put it over her shoulders to cover the torn blouse.

"God, Joana," he said, "another one."

This time there were no tears to shed. Joana's eyes were dry, her emotions numb. She nodded her head slowly. "Another one."

Chapter 19

The Boyle Heights district to the east of downtown Los Angeles was in its third or fourth incarnation of the past fifty years. First there had been the original old families who grew rich when Los Angles was young. They moved on in the 1920s to Bel Air in the north and the Palos Verdes peninsula in the south. Then came the Jewish immigrants. They worked hard, prospered, and left for the greener lawns of the San Fernando Valley and Beverly Hills. The middle-class Mexican-Americans were next, and after World War II they migrated east to the suburbs of the San Gabriel Valley. The once-proud Boyle Heights district now decayed under the sun, populated by poor Cubans, recent immigrants from Mexico, and uncounted illegal aliens.

Glen and Joana rode down a pleasant-seeming residential street in the Camaro. In the twilight of the June evening, the stucco houses, with their red tile roofs and arched windows, looked comfortable enough. The lawns in front of the houses had bare brown patches, but they were not piled with trash. The pavement was in good repair, and the small stores were brightly painted with the off-beat pastels typical of Mexican buildings. With the palm trees lining the street rustled by the soft summer wind, it was hard to visualize the grinding poverty of the people who lived here.

Glen stopped at the corner of Brooklyn Avenue and checked the number written on a slip of paper against the street addresses. “That should be it,” he said.

He pointed across the street to a two-story wooden frame building painted burnt orange on the side that faced the street. On

an enameled metal sign advertising Coca Cola were printed the words *Perez Liquor*.

"A liquor store?" Joana said.

"That's the address you got from the nurse."

Glen parked the car and they got out. Up the street, under a sputtering mercury-vapor light, a group of young Mexicans was gathered around a Plymouth Fury with stylized flames painted on the hood. They watched silently as Joana and Glen crossed the street to the small liquor store.

The store's one large window had been boarded over with plywood, which now carried the multicolored graffiti of the neighborhood gangs. *Los Avenidas, Gato Negro, Hombres Locos, Calle XVIII*. There were the lists of names in the distinctive angular printing style of the *barrio*, some of them X'ed out and scrawled over with the heavy insult, *puto*. For those who knew how to read it, it could serve as a bulletin board of community activities, telling who was on the street, who was moving into what territory, and who was likely to be in trouble.

Joana and Glen walked into the cramped little store. Shelves were lined with bottles of liquor and wine. There was a big refrigerator for beer and soft drinks, and a few canned goods, potato chips, and candy bars. The proprietor, a balding man with an overhanging stomach, was talking in rapid Spanish with a single customer, a stocky man with a white scar on his nose. They fell silent as the anglo couple entered.

"Hi," Glen said.

There was no response.

"This *is* 2500 Charles Street?"

The customer gathered up his purchase, a six-pack of Miller's, and edged away along the counter. The proprietor eyed Glen from behind lowered lids.

"*No sé*."

He had another exchange in Spanish with the customer. Joana picked out the word *migras*.

"No, no," she said, "we're not with the immigration service."

The proprietor studied them suspiciously. "You sure?"

"Absolutely," Joana said. "We're looking for the grandmother of a friend."

"That's right," Glen confirmed.

The proprietor said something else to the customer, who kept as much distance as possible between him and the young couple and hurried out the door.

"Okay," the bald man said, "who you looking for?"

"It's an older woman," Joana said. "Her name is Villaneuva. Her granddaughter Ynez gave us this address."

"Villanueva? The old *bruja?*"

"I think that's the one we mean," Joana said. "Does she live here?"

"Not here," the proprietor said quickly. "Upstairs. "She's got a room in the back."

"How do we get up there?" Glen asked.

"You wasting your time. The old *bruja* don' talk to nobody."

"All the same, we'd like to try," Joana said. "Is there a stairway?"

"Okay, but I think you're crazy. Go out and around the side of the building. There's some stairs. Go up them, and she's in the room at the top. Don' say I told you how to find her."

Joana thanked the man, and she and Glen went back out on the street. They followed a weed-grown alley between the store and a shoe-repair shop and found the flight of wooden stairs leading up to a door on the second floor. Joana started up, with Glen right behind her.

The door was weathered to driftwood gray, and fitted crookedly in the frame. A cold wisp of wind curled around Joana's

neck and she shivered. She and Glen looked at each other and exchanged uneasy smiles.

Glen knocked. The sound was curiously dead, as though there were nothing behind the door. They waited, hearing only the traffic noise from Brooklyn Avenue. Glen knocked again.

"Go away!" The voice from the other side of the door was thin and papery.

"We've come to see you," Glen said.

"I don' want to see anybody. Go away."

Joana leaned closer to the door. "Señora Villanueva, your granddaughter Ynez at the hospital sent us. She said she spoke to you."

There was a shuffling sound from inside the room. A bolt slid back and the door opened inward about six inches. A puff of stale air, sour with the smell of old age, escaped. The inside of the room was in shadows, and it took a moment for Joana's eyes to adjust so she could see the woman peering up at them from the doorway. She was not more than five feet tall, wearing a loose black sweater and a long skirt that hung limp on her thin body. Her face was as wrinkled as a walnut.

"Señora?"

The old woman said nothing.

"I'm Joana Raitt. This is my friend, Glen Early."

"I know who you are." The old woman's eyes were lively and bright in their deep sockets. "Come inside, if you must."

She backed away from the door. Joana and Glen entered, closing the door behind them. The room contained a sofa-bed covered with a gray military blanket, a wooden table with paint of several colors showing through the worn places, three mismatched chairs, and a cheap black-and-white television set on which a game-show host capered without sound. An old standing lamp with a forty-watt bulb gave the only illumination. The room's single

window had a dark green shade tacked to the frame.

The old woman sat down at the table. Joana sat across from her. Glen started to take the third chair.

"No," the old woman snapped. "Not you. You have no business with me." She pointed a bony finger at the sofa-bed. "You sit over there."

Glen looked surprised for a moment, but did as he was told.

For a full minute Señora Villanueva and Joana sat facing each other, not speaking.

"What is it you want of me?" the Mexican woman said finally.

"I — I'm not sure," Joana said. "Let me tell you my story first."

"No. I know all I have to know of your story. You are surrounded by death. You live in the midst of death. That is your story. Just tell me what it is you want of me."

"I guess what I want is for you to explain it to me. I don't understand what is happening to me. Or why."

There was another silence. The old woman's wheezing breath was the loudest thing in the room. At last she said, "You have walked in the land of the dead."

"Yes." Joana shivered, although the room was hot and stuffy.

"You were called before your time. You did not belong there."

Joana leaned forward, intent on every word.

"You traveled too far. You saw too much. The dead want you back."

Like an echo in her mind, the words spoken by the terrible voice in the tunnel came back to Joana. *You cannot go back now! You have come too far. You can never return!*

"That's what I felt," she said softly, "that they did not want me to come back."

"But you did in spite of them. You were called back to life by someone who loved you."

Joana glanced over at Glen. He was sitting very straight on the

edge of the sofa-bed, his head cocked to hear what was being said.

"I did come back," Joana said. "But now — "

"Now they have come for you. The dead have come to claim you."

Joana's throat was dry. She could only nod her head in answer.

"You have shown courage, young woman. You have fought them, even though they are very powerful. The dead."

"I want to live," Joana said. "I'm young."

"Everyone wants to live, child. Even the very old."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"Never mind 'sorry.' The young always think they will live forever."

Joana saw compassion in the bright, deep-set eyes, and smiled.

"But you must watch, always watch. *Cuidado*. Take care. Your struggle is not finished."

"There will be more of them?" A sob caught in Joana's throat.

"Yes. You were warned. You were told how many will come for you."

"I was told? I don't understand."

The old woman looked at her. Joana could read nothing in the wrinkled face. Then, again, an echo from the tunnel of the dead: *You may win once, not likely twice, most rarely thrice, and four times — never!*

"Four? Does it mean there will be four?"

Señora Villaneu va lifted and lowered her head in a silent assent.

Joana's mind raced ahead. The woman in the car, the maniac, the girl on the cliff. Three of them. She had fought three of them and won.

Four times — never!

Could she stand another of the dreadful walkers without going insane?

“You can see these things, Señora,” she said. “Do you see my fate? Will I survive the fourth walker?”

“That is not revealed to me,” said the old woman.

Joana felt the cold clutch of despair. “Is there nothing I can do? Must I walk in fear the rest of my life, wondering when the next of these creatures will come after me?”

“It is true you must walk a dangerous road,” the old woman said. “But there is hope. The dead have many powers, but there are things they cannot do. Only the fresh dead ones can walk. And even then their bodies will decay and finally crumble. When the four have come, there will be no more.”

“The fourth walker, the last, when will he come? Can you tell me that?”

“I cannot.”

Joana turned away. She wanted to cry.

“This much I can tell you,” the old woman continued, “None will come after the Eve of St. John.”

Instantly Joana was alert. *You must return by the Eve of St. John*.

“I have heard that name. What is it? What is the Eve of St. John?”

“It is the night of nights for all creatures not of this earth. It is the time when spirits fly and dead men walk. It is a night of sorcerers, a time of witchery. In my language it is *la noche de medio-verano*. Midsummer Night.”

“Midsummer Night!” Joana repeated. “Of course.” She looked at Glen. “When is that? I know it’s soon.”

Glen frowned in concentration. “June 23, I think. That would be Monday.”

Joana turned back to Señora Villaneuva. The old woman nodded slowly. “Monday.”

“Then, if they have not taken me by Monday, that will be the end of it?”

“The dead will have no power over you after the Eve of St. John.”

Joana breathed a great deep sigh. She felt almost as though she were already free. Then she saw that the old woman was still looking at her. In the dark, shadowed eyes was a warning.

“Is there something more I should know?” Joana said.

“I have nothing more to tell you. It is time for you to go.” The thin old voice had turned cold.

Joana rose uncertainly. Glen came over to stand beside her.

“Wait a minute,” he said, “there is a lot more you can tell us. What will this last of the walkers look like? How will we know him? What can we do to stop him?”

Señora Villanueva rose from her chair and drew her shriveled body erect. She turned her gaze on Glen, and sparks glowed deep in her eyes.

“I said I have nothing more to tell you. Nothing that will help you now.”

“But you do know more,” Glen persisted.

“Yes.”

“What, for God sake? What else do you see?”

“I see more death,” the old woman said, her voice suddenly loud in the closed room. “I see a friend who is not a friend. I see fire and blood. No more than that.”

“No more? What do you mean, no more?” Glen’s voice rose dangerously. “Why do you give us riddles? We need facts, dates, times.”

“Glen, please — ” Joana began.

The old woman stepped closer to him. She stabbed a finger up at him. “Facts, is it? You want facts? Very well, young man, I can give you facts. I can tell you the day on which you die. I can tell you how you die. And there is nothing you can do to change it.”

The silence in the room was sudden and stifling.

“Well? Do you want these facts now, my so-eager young man?”

Glen’s face went pale. He was sweating. Finally, in a voice barely audible, he said, “No.”

The old woman continued to stare at him. Slowly she lowered her finger from his face. “You choose wisely. There is no greater curse than to know when and how you will die.”

Glen stood as though paralyzed. Joana nudged him and he came out of it and started for the door.

“Señora, how can I thank you?” Joana said.

“I want no thanks.”

“Then at least let me pay you something.” She started to open her bag.

“Money? Money has no meaning for me. Go now. I am tired.”

Joana and Glen left the dim, musty room and walked down the flight of stairs to the alley. When they reached the street they stood for a moment breathing in the clean night air. The solid pavement, the palm trees, the boys around their flame-painted car, all seemed part of a world apart from Señora Villanueva and her dark little room. It was a familiar world, a world of life.

They crossed the street and got into the car. Glen started the engine, then turned to Joana.

“What do you think?” he said.

“Think?”

“About the old lady.”

“I believe her. What other choice is there?”

Glen put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. “I don’t know. She might have been setting you up.”

“Setting me up for what? I offered her money, she wouldn’t take any.”

“Not this time, maybe. That’s the way con games work. They hook you in by giving you something for nothing, then they come back with something even better, only this time it’s going to cost

you."

"Glen, pull over."

"What?"

"Just pull over and stop the car."

Giving her a puzzled look, Glen eased the Camaro over to the curb and stopped. He put the shift lever in *park* and turned in the seat to face Joana.

"Now what *is* all this about a con game?" she demanded.

He shifted in the seat uncomfortably. "Well … what do we really know about this old woman, anyway? Some girl, who we don't know either, claims she has mystic powers of some kind. It's all kind of hard to swallow."

Joana stared at him. "Glen, I don't understand you. You didn't say anything about having doubts before we came. You were just as eager as I was." A thought hit her. "Wait a minute, did you think it was part of the con game when she offered to tell you when you were going to die, and how?"

"I …" Glen turned away and looked out through the windshield. "No," he said in a different, subdued voice. "I believed she could do it. God help me, I still believe she knows."

"Then what …?"

"I was scared, Joana. Scared right down to the soles of my feet. When we got out of there and onto the street again and everything looked so ordinary, so unthreatening, I was ashamed of myself. A part of me could not admit that a little old Mexican lady had pointed a finger at me and scared me more than anything ever before in my life. I had to deny it somehow. I had to prove I was strong, so I started running off at the mouth and couldn't stop."

Joana pulled his head down and kissed him. "You are strong, Glen. You're strong and brave, and you're the man I love. Can we go home now?"

He laid a hand on her cheek and looked deep into her eyes for

a moment. “Joana,” he said, “you are a hell of a woman.”

Chapter 20

Dr. Hovde sat in a canvas chair across the coffee table from Joana and Glen in the house on Beachwood Drive. He leaned forward listening intently as Joana described the meeting earlier that evening with the grandmother of Ynez Villanueva.

When Joana finished telling her story there was a long silence in the room. It was Hovde who finally spoke.

"It's fantastic. Even though indirectly it was I who sent you to the woman, this is a hard, hard thing to accept. The whole idea of witches and walking dead men is so completely foreign to everything I believe in."

"I know how you feel," Glen said. "I was there, and I'm still stunned by what I heard. God knows I don't want to believe these things are happening, but can we afford not to believe it?"

"If you have any other explanation, Warren, I'll jump at it," Joana said.

"I wish I had," said Hovde, "but I haven't. The only thing we can do is assume that everything the old woman told you is true, and get on with it. Do you have paper and something to write with?"

Joana brought him a yellow legal pad and a ball-point pen. He laid the pad flat on the coffee table in front of him.

"Sometimes it helps me attack a problem to write it down and look at it."

"You sound like an engineer now," Glen said with a brief smile.

"The first thing to do," Hovde went on, "is define the issue."

For a moment no one spoke, then Glen said, "Hell, that's easy

enough. If we accept what the old woman said tonight, then someone, or something, is trying to kill Joana."

Dr. Hovde wrote at the top of the pad: *Joana's life in danger*.

"What do we know about the danger?"

"She said they could send four of those zombies, no more."

The doctor wrote: *Maximum 4 Walkers*.

Joana shivered, but said nothing.

"Three of them are used up now," Glen said.

"That's right," Joana agreed. "There was the woman in the car, the man who broke in here Sunday night, and the girl on the cliff."

Dr. Hovde made another note on the pad: *3 down, 1 to go*.

"One to go," Joana said, reading. She closed her eyes for a moment.

"At least there's a time limit," Glen said. "The last one has to come by the Eve of St. John. That's Monday. If we get past that, we've won."

Deadline: June 23, Hovde wrote.

"Knowing that, I think it would be wise if Joana is not left alone between now and the deadline," he said.

"Definitely," Glen agreed. "She can stay at my place."

"Maybe you ought to think about getting her away somewhere, out of town."

"I could do that," Glen said. "Drive her up to San Francisco, stay there until after Monday."

"Just a minute," Joana said. The sudden sharpness of her tone made both men look at her quickly. "You two are making plans for me as though I'm not even in the room. I'm not a helpless child, you know. And I'm not some delicate glass figurine that has to be packed in layers of cotton."

"I'm sorry, Joana," Hovde said. "We're just trying to come up with the best way to protect you."

"We know you're not helpless," Glen added. "And you're

certainly not made of glass."

"Okay," Joana said more gently. "I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. But let's look at the suggestions you're making. Don't leave me alone. That's fine, I'm not anxious to be alone right now, but we've got four days. Nobody wants to be watched every second for four days. And how do we know it will make any difference? I wasn't alone Sunday night, and that maniac still broke in here and came after me."

"But we have an idea what we're fighting now," Glen said. "That makes a difference. Sunday we were taken by surprise."

"That's true," Joana conceded. "But leaving town doesn't make sense to me. If something is making it possible for dead people to get up and walk and kill, it could happen just as easily in San Francisco or anywhere else as right here."

"Yes, I see what you mean," Hovde said. "We've got to expand our thinking beyond what we know as the natural world."

"It isn't easy when we don't know all the rules," Glen said.

"There are some things we know about the walkers," Hovde said. "They are not invulnerable. Again, taking the word of the old woman, if only a newly dead person can be turned into one, we won't have to worry about old corpses rising out of the cemetery."

"That's good news," Joana said.

"At least it tells us they have limitations. What else do we know about them?"

"They move easily enough," Joana said. "They're fast and they react quickly."

Dr. Hovde wrote *WALKERS* in the center of the page and underlined it. Below he wrote: *Agility*.

"And I can tell you they're strong," Glen said. "Stronger than normal people. The one who broke in here Sunday threw me around like I was stuffed with feathers."

Strength.

“And I can add that they retain the power of speech,” Hovde said, “even though the personality dies. The husband of the woman in the car said she talked to him lucidly for several hours after her apparent death. The man Ed Frankovich works for — he was the one here Sunday — also said he spoke.”

Speech.

“What about the girl on the beach?” Glen asked.

“I didn’t hear her speak,” Joana said, “but she was terribly strong. I was lucky to get away from her.”

“Have they found her body?” Glen asked.

“Not yet,” said Hovde. “The currents are strong off the point where she fell in, and the body could have been carried miles up the shoreline. I’ve asked a friend at the hospital to call me when they find her.”

Joana grew thoughtful. “Warren, you talked to the husband of one of these walkers and the employer of another. What kind of people were they, anyway? I mean when they were alive.”

“Ordinary,” said Hovde. “That’s the only word I can think of to describe them. Yvonne Carlson was an average middle-aged housewife, from all evidence loving to her husband and content with her life. Ed Frankovich was something of a loner, but apparently a quiet, gentle man. There seems to be no connection between what these people were in life and what they became. They retain a few of the surface traits of the living person, but essentially the walkers are machines of destruction that exist entirely apart from the people who occupied the bodies.”

“Another thing you can add to the list is that they’re hard to kill,” Glen said. “Or destroy, or whatever the word should be.”

“That is the truth,” Joana said with feeling. “I watched you hit that creature over and over again, and it just kept coming.”

“That’s an important point,” said Dr. Hovde. “What does it take to stop the walkers? The woman in the car, for instance.”

“She just got out and collapsed on the ground,” Joana said. “Nobody laid a hand on her, and I’m sure she couldn’t have been hurt in the car. It simply ran into a bush and stalled.”

Hovde nodded. “The only marks on the body were from the electrocution the night before. Nothing from that afternoon.”

“And the one who was in here,” Glen said, “as hard and as often as I hit him, it didn’t even slow him down. He was on his feet and still trying to get at Joana until the other people came running up. That’s when he finally dropped.”

“There was a crowd around the woman too when she collapsed, wasn’t there, Joana?”

“Yes. They ran up to where the car came to a stop, and were standing there when she got out.”

“Maybe,” the doctor said thoughtfully, “when the walkers are surrounded, and because of the sheer odds against them can’t finish their task, they just … quit.”

“That’s quite a jump in logic,” Glen said.

“Maybe it is, but it’s a possibility to consider. What about the girl on the beach, Joana?”

“It fits. It was not until Glen and the other people from the restaurant got close to us that she went over the edge. I can’t swear that’s why it happened — she had ripped away a piece of my blouse and lost her balance.”

Glen frowned. “Even if this is true, even if the walkers self-destruct when a crowd surrounds them, what good will it do us?”

“The more we know about them, the better prepared we’ll be,” Joana said.

“To me it’s one more reason why you shouldn’t be left alone.”

“Glen, are you going to start the big-man-must-protect-little-girl business all over again?”

“Damn it, this is no time for a consciousness-raising session.”

Dr. Hovde spoke up. “Glen, Joana, we’ve got to work together

now, or all the knowledge we've gained is useless."

"I know," Joana said more quietly. "Believe me, Glen, I appreciate what you've done for me, what you're doing. It's just that I hate to feel like some helpless creature who can do nothing but hide in the corner while the men go off to battle."

"That's not the way it is," Glen said. "You know that."

"Yes, I know it. All the same, it bothers me."

"You'll have plenty of time to hash all this out after Monday," Dr. Hovde said.

"In the meantime," said Glen, "you do agree that it's best to stay with me until this is over?"

"I'll stay with you," Joana said, "and I'll love it. But let's make it here at my house instead of your apartment."

"What difference does it make?"

"If I'm in my own house it will feel less like I'm running away, that's all."

"Fair enough," Glen said. "Starting tonight, I'm your constant companion until this nightmare is over."

"What about your job?"

"No problem. I'll take tomorrow and Monday off. They can get along without me that long."

Joana started to protest, then relaxed and smiled. "All right, Glen. Thanks."

Dr. Hovde ran over the list he had made, reading the notations aloud as he ticked them off.

"It's not a whole lot, is it?" Glen said.

"No, but it's better than nothing. We have some guidelines now, so we're not battling shadows." He consulted his watch. "It's time for me to be going. If anything comes up, day or night, you have the phone numbers where you can reach me."

Joana walked with him to the door. "Thank you, Warren, for everything you've done."

“Forget it.”

“No, I mean it. You didn’t have to get mixed up in this.”

“Yes I did,” he said. “I was floating along in kind of an isolated, self-pitying void. This ugly business has forced me to take a look at my own life. I’ve been staying apart and uninvolved from too many things for far too long. No man is an island, right?”

“Right.” Joana squeezed the doctor’s hand and watched him walk away on the curving path through the bushes toward the street. When she turned back Glen was standing behind her.

He opened his arms to her and Joana stepped eagerly into their embrace. Her body was acutely alive to his. She felt the heat of him as intensely as though they were both naked. He kissed her long and deep, and when they broke apart, both were breathing hard.

“This seems like a crazy time for it,” she said, “but I want you to make love to me, Glen. I want it so bad my teeth ache.”

He kissed her again. “You’re right, it is a crazy time, but I’m damned if I don’t want you too. Very, very much.”

“Do you suppose danger has some sort of weird aphrodisiac effect?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, let’s not waste it.”

A long time later they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Chapter 21

Friday morning it was hot. Joana and Glen awoke in her bed covered only by a sheet, which they quickly threw off. At the window a curtain billowed inward, and a dry, scorching wind blew into the bedroom. The Santa Ana wind. Several times a year, without pattern and without warning, it blew in off the desert and turned Los Angeles into an oven.

Glen groaned and rolled over on his stomach. “Going to be a hot sonofabitch today.”

“Unusual for June,” Joana said, then giggled at the triteness of their conversation. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Surprise me.”

Joana kissed him and got out of bed. She pulled on a light lacy robe and went out into the kitchen. She looked through the refrigerator and selected a cantaloupe, which she sliced down the middle. She lay two thick pieces of ham in a frying pan and carefully broke four eggs into a bowl. She heard the bathroom door open and close.

“Over easy?” She called in the direction of the bathroom.

“Terrific,” he called back, but his voice lacked enthusiasm.

“Anything wrong?”

“I need a shave.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him, “we’ll rough it.”

The shower hissed, and she went back into the kitchen to get everything ready. In ten minutes Glen padded out wearing a towel around his waist. He rubbed a hand across his chin.

“Seriously, there are some things I should pick up from my

place."

"Like what?"

"My razor, fresh underwear, stuff like that."

"I have a razor," Joana told him."

"That sissy little thing? My beard would shatter it.

"Wow, listen to Mister Macho."

"Do you want me to wear your underwear too?"

Joana heard the note of discord in their exchange. Just below the banter was the jagged edge of hostility that so often surfaced when the Santa Ana wind blew. Speaking carefully she said, "Why don't you take a run out to your place after breakfast and pick up what you need?"

"I think I'll do that," he said. "Are you coming along?"

"I don't think so. It will give me a chance to clean things up a little around here. I haven't touched the place in more than a week."

"I don't like leaving you alone."

"It will only be for an hour. Surely I can take care of myself that long."

"If you stay here, promise me you won't open the door for anybody you don't know."

"Are you kidding? After what happened last Sunday night?"

"I mean it, promise me."

"All right, Glen, I promise."

Still he looked doubtful.

"Really, I'm not some fragile, empty-headed little powder puff."

"I know you're not," Glen said. "I just … oh, the hell with it. I'll make it as quick as I can."

They ate breakfast and kidded each other and regained a little of their good humor. Outside, the wind blew and the day grew hotter. When they had stacked the dishes Glen kissed her, giving her an extra rub with his bristly chin, and left for the Marina.

When she was alone in the house Joana felt the heat more than ever. There was no air conditioning in the little house, and her fan was not working. She had promised Glen she would keep the doors closed, and the screened windows provided only a minimum of ventilation. She was restless, her nerves gritty.

It was the wind, she told herself. The effects of the Santa Ana were well known. It blew in out of the east and scraped your nerve ends. Children cried without reason, love affairs ended, people stepped out of high windows, the murder rate jumped, when the Santa Ana wind blew.

Joana started the housecleaning as she had planned, but soon gave it up. It was too hot and she was too edgy for slogging around the house with dustcloth and vacuum. She made herself a glass of iced tea and searched the *TV Guide* for one of those good old movies that always play in the mornings when nobody is home, or late at night when you're asleep. All that was on today was an old Presley movie, and Joana was in no mood for Presley.

She slumped in a chair, sipped at her iced tea, and tried to read a magazine, but she could not get interested.

The telephone rang. Joana leaped for it eagerly, as though afraid the caller might hang up if she did not answer on the first ring.

"Hello. Is this Joana?" The voice was familiar, but different. It was flat and without timbre.

"Peter?"

"Yes."

"You sound strange."

"An accident. I hurt my throat."

"Where have you been? I've been wondering what happened to you. You said you were coming over Sunday night."

"That's when I hurt my throat. I couldn't come."

"Oh, Peter, so much has happened since I talked to you last. I

don't know where to begin telling you about it."

He seemed not to hear. "I have something here that you have to see."

"Where? At your house?"

"Yes. I want you to come here."

"Can't you tell me about it?"

"That's no good. I have to show you."

"All right. Glen will be here in an hour or so. We'll come up then."

"No. That will be too late."

"Peter, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Yes. I can't talk about it. Please come, Joana."

She hesitated. Glen would not approve of her leaving the house. But Glen did not make the rules for her. People had been going out of their way in the past week to help her. Peter included. It was time she started paying some of her debts. Also, it would be a great relief to get out of the stifling house for a while.

"All right, Peter, I'll come. Is there anything I should bring?"

"No. Just hurry," he said in the odd new voice. Then the line clicked dead.

Joana sat down at the kitchen table and wrote a note to Glen:

I've gone to Peter's house. He's in some kind of trouble. Back soon.

Love,
J

She tacked the note to the outside of the door as she left the house.

Before locking the door behind her, Joana looked carefully around the brushy yard that lay between her and the street. This was no time to get careless. Nothing moved in the heat. Even Bandido lay prostrate and panting in the shade of an oleander bush.

Overhead the sky was a relentless blue-white. The heat was a palpable weight on her head and shoulders. On a day like this no one would expect to see dead men walk.

She hurried down the path to the street and got into the Datsun. It was like a furnace, but when she got both front windows lowered and the car moving, that provided some ventilation.

She drove up Laurel Canyon to Peter's street and found it deserted. Sheltered by the hills from the desert wind, the trees there hung limp and dejected in the stagnant heat.

Joana parked the Datsun and got out. She stood for a moment on the sidewalk looking up at Peter's house. It was closed up tight, the blinds drawn down on the windows. She felt a tiny pang of apprehension. The empty, airless street oppressed her.

Then the door of the house opened and Peter stood there looking down at her. He did not come forward, but stayed in the shadows. Nevertheless, Joana recognized that it was Peter. He seemed to have something around his neck. A bandage, she guessed, over the injury he told her about.

"Hi," she called.

Peter said nothing, but beckoned her to him.

Joana started up the rickety flight of wooden stairs. Peter vanished back into the house. She continued up onto the porch, then paused at the doorway.

"Peter?"

"In here," his queer, flat voice called to her from somewhere inside.

Joana stepped over the threshold into the dim living room. A blast of stale, sweltering air hit her like a physical blow. Unlike the arid heat outside, the interior of the house was damp and steamy. It felt as though the windows had not been opened for days. Even worse than the soggy heat was the overpowering sweet smell of incense. When Joana was here before she had detected a trace of

strawberry in the air, but nothing like this. The haze of gray smoke made her gag.

"Peter, where are you? What's the matter here?"

She walked across the carpet to the beaded curtain that hung between the living room and the small dining room. Beyond it she could see the kitchen and a short hallway that would lead to the bedrooms and bath. The beads of the curtain had an unpleasant clammy feel.

Something was wrong. Something was most terribly wrong in this house. Under the heavy smell of incense there was another odor. It reminded Joana of the dead rat Bandido had dragged behind the refrigerator and left. It had taken her three days to find the rotting corpse.

She felt a powerful need to get out of there. Letting the beads rattle back into place, she turned toward the front door. It slammed shut. Peter stood facing her with his back pressed against the panel.

Joana stared at him through the gloom and the layers of smoke from the incense. He wore an open-collared shirt, but there was a necktie knotted around his throat. It was too tight. Much too tight. And his face. Oh, God!

Peter's eyes were dusty and lifeless. The swollen flesh of his face was mottled purple. The tip of his tongue protruded from between cracked lips. His body gave off putrescence in waves.

"You're one of them!" she said.

Peter made no reply, but raised his arms and came toward her.

Joana whirled and fought her way through the bead curtain and ran toward the rear of the house. There had to be another way out.

She ran down the hallway to a bedroom. A king-size bed, freshly made and unslept-in, took up most of the floor space. There was a window, but steel burglar bars on the outside made escape that way impossible. Out in the dining room beads clattered and

bounced on the floor as Peter tore through the curtain.

Joana flew out of the bedroom and almost ran into Peter in the hall. He reached for her, and she felt the cold, doughy touch of his hand on her bare arm before she pulled free.

The next door she came to was the bathroom. Without hesitating, Joana flung herself inside, slammed the door, and rolled the bolt into place. There was a soft thump as Peter hit the door on the outside.

For a moment she cowered back against the wall, breathing hard, staring fearfully at the locked door. As she watched, the panel shook under a booming blow from the other side. Joana flinched. She looked wildly about the room for a means of escape.

Boom!

She swept aside the shower curtain. There was a window at eye level, but it was only eight inches from top to bottom. She could never get through that.

Boom! Something gave in the door with a loud crack.

Joana tore open the wall cabinet, searching for anything that could help her. A weapon. Anything. Electric shaver, talc, cologne, aspirin, toothpaste, hair spray. No good. Nothing she could use. And what good were weapons against the walkers, anyway? She remembered Glen hitting and hitting the man back behind her house until his skull was jellied, and still he came on.

Boom! A long vertical crack split the door panel.

Joana dropped to her knees and yanked open the door to the cabinet under the sink. Toilet paper, cleanser, brushes, a sponge, a bottle of pills, rubbing alcohol.

Boom! The crack widened. Splinters of wood peppered the bathroom floor.

Joana seized the bottle of alcohol. On the label in black capitals was printed FLAMMABLE. Would fire mean anything to a walker? Effective or not, it was the only thing available to her, and it might

distract the creature long enough for her to get past it and out of the house.

Boom! A big chunk of the door smashed inward. For an instant Joana was frozen where she stood. As she watched, the panel shuddered again, more wood broke away, and a fist came through. The flesh of the hand, pulpy from decay, hung loose and torn from the battering. Bones and wirelike tendons were clearly visible.

Boom! The hole in the door grew. The swollen, mindless face that had been Peter Landau's was there looking at her. The ruined hand reached in through the broken door and fumbled for the bolt.

Fighting for control, Joana unscrewed the cap from the bottle of alcohol. She took a drinking glass from a holder next to the sink and poured it full of the clear liquid. The pungent odor of the alcohol squeezed tears from her eyes.

Peter had found the bolt now, but the mangled hand could not manipulate it. The hand withdrew, and the other, the good one, came through the hole.

Joana set the bottle and the glass of alcohol down long enough to search through her pockets.

Dear God, let there be matches.

At the instant Peter rattled the bolt back into the door Joana's fingers closed over a book of paper matches. The doorknob turned. The shattered door was knocked inward. For a fraction of a second the dead creature was framed in the doorway. Joana took up the full glass and dashed the alcohol into the purpled face, wetting down the front of the shirt at the same time. She dropped the glass and, as it crashed on the tile floor, struck a match. She threw the match at Peter. It bounced off his shoulder and went out.

A scream rose in Joana's throat. She fought it down. The thing was in the bathroom with her now with its hands reaching for her, one of them whole, the other a shattered wreck of bone and tendon. The reek of alcohol was strong, but the odor of death was stronger.

Joana struck another match. Gripping it between thumb and forefinger, she reached out and forced herself to hold the flame against the alcohol-soaked shirt.

She held it there one second, two seconds. Abruptly the shirt and the swollen head whopped into light blue flame. The creature reacted with what remained of human instinct. It staggered backward, arms beating at the flames that licked across the chest.

Joana ran past Peter into the hallway. Behind her, there was a whimpering cry as Peter lurched out of the bathroom and came after her.

She made it through the front door and flew down the steps, taking them two and three at a time. The inhuman voice wailed behind her. When she reached the street she turned to see the flaming figure of a man stumble out of the house, the arms still reaching for her.

A car coming up the street from Laurel Canyon jammed to a stop as the driver caught sight of the fleeing girl and the burning man. Someone across the way, hearing the commotion, came out of his house. Then someone else. And another. The people ran into the street, gathering into a small crowd at the foot of Peter's stairs.

Above them, the thing that had been Peter Landau, the decaying flesh crisped and splitting under the flames, stumbled at the stop of the stairs, fell, and bounced in a tumbling fiery mass all the way to the street. Several people tried to approach the burning figure, but could not get close in the intense heat.

"Get a blanket!" someone shouted.

"Never mind," said somebody else. "Nothing can help him now."

Joana sagged against the side of the Datsun. The flames crackled merrily. Peter's flesh sizzled and split. The viscera steamed. Joana turned her head away.

As the flames subsided, one of the neighbors came down with a

garden hose and sprayed water over the body. Much of the face was burned away, leaving a grisly smile of exposed jawbone and strong white teeth.

Joana braced herself and walked over to look down at the steaming remains. Later she would think about Peter Landau, remember him as he had been, and grieve for him. Right now all she could think was, *There lies number four. It's over. I've won.*

Chapter 22

The heat broke Sunday morning as winds from offshore carried mist and high clouds inland, driving the Santa Ana back to the desert. In the evening Joana and Glen sat close together on the couch. A Woody Allen movie was playing on television, but neither of them laughed, because neither of them was really watching the picture.

"It's over," Joana said, as though to herself. "It's really over. Why don't I feel happier about it?"

"It's been a rough time," Glen said.

"For sure."

They were silent for several minutes, then Joana spoke again.

"Do you realize it's been only eleven days? Eleven days since I went for that swim at the Marina Village and this whole ghastly nightmare started. It seems like the walkers have been following me forever."

"It will take a while," Glen said. "You don't get over something like that in a day. You'll need some time for reentry to the real world."

"Ah, yes, the real world. Where the dead stay dead, and only the living walk."

After a moment Glen said, "It was bad with Peter, wasn't it."

"It was the worst. Because I knew him. Or I knew who he was before he became that … thing. The others were bad enough, but I never knew them when they were alive. They were just zombies. They might as well have never lived. I'm talking too much, aren't I?"

"Go ahead, if it makes you feel better."

“It doesn’t really. I’m just running on nervous energy. The only thing that will make me feel better is time.”

“Was there any trouble with the police about Peter’s death?”

“Oddly enough, there wasn’t. That Sergeant Olivares from downtown moved right in and took over the whole scene. He said not to worry, it would go into the books as accidental death. I think he knows more about the walkers than he will admit.”

The doorbell rang, and they both jumped, muscles tense. Then they exchanged sheepish grins.

“Who is it?” Joana called.

“Warren.”

She walked over and opened the door. Dr. Hovde came in. At his side was a tall woman with blonde hair, just beginning to silver. She had smiling blue eyes.

“Joana, Glen,” said the doctor, “I’d like you to meet Marge. My wife. Honey, these are the people I’ve told you about.”

Marge Hovde shook hands with both of them. “I’m very glad to meet you,” she said. “Warren tells me you’ve just been through some unpleasant times.”

“Yes, we have,” Joana said, “but they’re over now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Marge looked at her husband. “With a little luck our bad times will be over too.”

Glen looked from one to the other. “Does this mean I’m losing a neighbor?”

“Just as soon as I can pack my records and clear out,” said Hovde. “The events of the past week have made me do a lot of thinking about life in general, and my life in particular. We had our differences, Marge and I, but who doesn’t. One thing I learned for sure is that living alone is not my style.”

“Mine either,” said Marge. “So when Warren said why don’t we try to work things out, I jumped at it. Then it seemed foolish for him to be driving back and forth from one end of Los Angeles to the

other, so …"

"So I'm moving back to the Valley," Hovde finished for her. "Now that we've had a near-divorce, maybe I'll fit in better."

"I think it's wonderful," Joana said. "And I just know it's going to work out. The two of you look so right together."

"Yes, we do make a lovely couple," Hovde said, grinning at his wife.

"Modest too," she added.

"I'll be moving out too before long," Glen said.

"Really? You mean you and Joana …?"

"That's it."

"I guess it's pretty old-fashioned of us," Joana said, "but we're going to get married."

"Right after the World Series," Glen added, smiling.

Dr. Hovde pumped Glen's hand. "I'm really glad to hear that," he said. "Congratulations. You're getting a hell of a woman."

"I know it," Glen said.

"And, Joana, all the best to you, always." He kissed her on the cheek, and they all laughed for no other reason than feeling good about themselves.

Joana brought out a bottle of burgundy and they drank to each other's good luck in the future. In a little while Warren and Marge Hovde left. Joana stood in the doorway smiling after them.

"They look like newlyweds," she said. "Holding hands and giggling with each other."

"I've never seen the doctor look happier," Glen said.

"What do you think we'll look like after twenty years?"

"Lord, who knows? Who *wants* to know. I've had enough predictions and apparitions for one lifetime."

"I'll second that," Joana said.

Glen stretched and cracked off a yawn. "I'd better get going. Tomorrow it's back to the workaday world."

“Good old world,” Joana said.

She kissed him good night in the doorway and they stood for a long time holding each other very tight.

Chapter 23

Dr. Hovde whistled happily as he parked his car and strolled across the lot toward the Emergency entrance to West Los Angeles Receiving Hospital. He did a little dance step, then looked across the way and saw two student nurses watching him with amused smiles. He waved at them, they waved back.

He had arranged his schedule to have this Monday morning at the hospital, then take off a couple of days at the end of the week so he and Marge could drive up to Tahoe and work at getting reacquainted. Last night they had slept together for the first time since he moved out a month ago. No, before that, actually. Their lovemaking had been better than ever before. Maybe, he thought, all couples should take a break somewhere about the midpoint of their marriages. No, on second thought, most of them would probably never get back together. It seemed to be working for him and Marge, and that was all that mattered.

He entered the hospital, nodded to the others on the ward, and hung up his light jacket. He scrubbed up and put on the white coat. Nothing was happening in Emergency this morning that needed his attention. A dog bite, a separated shoulder from the Venice bike path, a firecracker burn, a battered wife. Nothing out of the ordinary, everything under control.

Hovde wandered out into the hall to get a cup of coffee and think about last night with Marge. In the two days since he had impulsively called and asked to see her, they had talked more together, really talked, than in the last five years of their marriage. He was surprised and chagrined to discover that Marge had

intelligent opinions about subjects he had not suspected she cared about. She also had insights to offer him on everyday living that he truly listened to for the first time. It was like meeting a new, exciting woman, only it was better because they had all their memories intact.

"Son of a gun, if you don't look like a man who got a little last night."

Kermit Breedlove's voice startled Hovde out of his reverie. He grinned embarrassedly, realizing he was standing there with his coffee cup in his hand looking foolishly happily.

"Hi, Kermit," he said to the pathologist. "How's things in the icebox?"

"We got a customer in last night that you were asking about. I tried to call you at your apartment, but there was no answer."

Hovde was instantly alert. "Who is it?"

"Body of a girl, Caucasian, about seventeen. They pulled her out of the surf up at Leo Carillo Beach about five o'clock yesterday afternoon. I think she's your cliff-jumper."

"Thanks. You know why I wanted to hear."

"Yeah."

"Have you done an autopsy yet?"

"No. The body was in sorry shape, what with the battering it took on the rocks, and then the crabs."

"Then I don't suppose you can be sure of the time of death?"

"Come along to my office," Breedlove said.

"What have you got?"

"Some of the girl's friends are there. They came in to identify the body."

"Did you get a positive I.D.?"

"Yeah." Breedlove's toothpick shifted sides of his mouth. "The girl's name was Quilla Styles. Her parents live up in Santa Barbara, but they're on a world cruise now and can't be reached. Apparently

the girl hasn't lived at home for a couple of years."

Hovde studied the pathologist as they walked side by side down the hospital hallway. "What's the story, Kermit? There's something you're not telling me."

"I'd rather have you hear it from the girl's friends. Here we are."

Breedlove opened the door to his office and gestured Hovde inside. On a black leather couch sat two young men and a fat girl with an outbreak of pimples on her chin. The trio was dressed in soiled thrift-shop clothes. Their body odor was rank in the small office. Sad, scruffy reminders of the hippie culture of the 1960s.

Facing them sat a young man in the neat brown uniform of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office. He turned toward the door when the doctors entered.

"Go right ahead, Deputy," said Breedlove. "This is Dr. Hovde, a colleague of mine."

The deputy nodded and returned his attention to the three young people on the couch.

"How many of you are living in the burned-out condominium?" he asked.

"Who knows, man?" said one of the boys, a pale, moon-faced youth. "Six, eight, sometimes twenty. People come and go, you know."

"How long had Quilla Styles been staying there?"

"A week, a month, whatever. She came and went like everybody else."

The deputy sighed audibly. "All right, suppose you tell me what happened on the evening of Wednesday, June eighteenth."

"We're not going to get busted, are we?" the fat girl said.

"Just tell me what happened, please."

The second boy spoke up. He was thin, with a pointed nose that dripped on his upper lip. "Don't worry, they can't use anything

we say against us. He didn't read us our rights, and besides, we got no attorney here."

"You are not under arrest," the deputy explained patiently. "I'm just trying to establish the circumstances of the young woman's death."

"Yeah, well, okay," said the moon-faced boy, "just let me get it together for a minute." He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then said, "What happened, we were doing a little angel dust Wednesday, okay?"

Breedlove and Hovde exchanged a glance. Angel dust, PCP, phencyclidine. Cheap and easy to make, readily available at any high school. And just about the deadliest drug on the streets.

"No big deal," the boy continued. "Just nice and mellow, okay?"

The deputy made some notes in a book.

"So it turns out Quilla isn't used to angel dust, right? I mean, we all thought she turned on to anything. She talked like a heavy doper. How were we going to know she was new at it?"

"I mean, all she ever did before was grass," the pimply girl put in. "She was a beginner."

"What happened after you all took the angel dust?" the deputy asked.

"Quilla starts freaking right away. I mean, bad. Screaming and running around and yelling a bunch of crazy stuff. Then she took off up the Coast Highway."

"Did you try to stop her?"

"Are you kidding? Did you ever try to stop somebody freaked out on angel dust? No way. I mean, they're so strong you wouldn't believe it."

Dr. Hovde listened to the exchange with a growing sense of horror.

"What happened then?" the deputy prompted.

“Okay, Quilla runs into the parking lot of this restaurant up the highway, right? Two or three of us are following her. We want to see she don’t do nothing to bring the cops down on us, you know.”

“Sure. Go on.”

“Then she really flips out. I mean all the way. There’s this girl standing down by the cliff looking out over the water, and Quilla takes off at her like a wild animal, screaming all the way. The girl sees her coming and runs away along the cliff with Quilla after her. About that time the people inside the restaurant hear all the yelling, and they come spilling out the door. The last we seen, Quilla and the girl are wrestling way down on the edge of the cliff. You could see them clear in the moonlight. Well, we didn’t hang around there anymore, we split for home.”

“This happened Wednesday night?”

“Yeah.”

“This is Monday. Why didn’t you report it before today?”

“Be serious, man. I mean, do we want a lot of cops crawling all over our place? Anyway, we didn’t know for sure Quilla was dead.”

Dr. Hovde broke in. “Are you saying that this girl was alive last Wednesday when you followed her to the restaurant?”

Everyone in the room turned to stare at the doctor.

“Well, damn it, was she?” he snapped.

“Hey, yes, man, she was alive. Freaked out, sure, but just as alive as you are, okay?”

Hovde did not wait to hear any more. He jerked open the door and rushed out and down the hall to the nurses’ station. The thought pounded at him that Quilla Styles was alive last Wednesday. Alive. She was not one of the walkers. There had been only three, not the four that were coming. And tonight, Midsummer Night, was the Eve of St. John.

He snatched the telephone from in front of a startled nurse and dialed Joana’s home number. He let it ring seven times, then

slammed the receiver down in frustration when there was no answer.

"Do you have an L.A. phone book?" he demanded of the nurse.

"Why, yes, Doctor."

"Well, let me have it!"

The nurse blinked, then reached under the counter and brought up the thick book of Los Angeles white pages. Hovde riffled through it until he found the name of the department-store chain that Joana worked for. He spun the dial and drummed his fingers impatiently, waiting for an answer.

He was transferred from the switchboard to the corporate offices, and finally to the advertising department. He asked for the manager.

"John Walton speaking."

"Mr. Walton, this is Dr. Warren Hovde. It's urgent that I speak to Joana Raitt."

"I'd like to help you out, Doctor, but Joana hasn't come in yet. She called to say she'd be a little late."

"As soon as she comes in, have her call me at this number." He read the digits off the front of the telephone. "Tell her it's most important."

"I'll sure do that, Doc."

Hovde rang off and stood for a moment, his pulse racing. Joana would be relaxed and off guard today, thinking the last of the walkers had struck and been beaten. She did not know there was still one unaccounted for.

He lifted the phone again and dialed the number of Glen Early's office. He listened to the buzz on the other end with sweat beginning to soak through-his shirt.

Chapter 24

Joana swung down the path leading from her house to the street, feeling light and free. She was late starting for the office, but she had called in, and John Walton told her to go ahead and take all the time she wanted. The extra hour in bed was a treat, but it was enough. She was eager now to go to work and get her life back into a normal pattern.

She took out her key case to unlock the Datsun, and paused. Was that her telephone ringing? Who would be calling at this hour?

She ran back across the lawn, fumbling the front door key out of the case as she ran. Inside, the telephone continued to ring. She got the door open, ran into the house, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

Only a dial tone answered.

Damn, wasn't that always the way? It was a small thing, but a nagging annoyance in her otherwise carefree day. Why couldn't they have hung on for just one more ring? Don't worry about it, she told herself. It was probably somebody trying to sell her a bargain trip to Las Vegas.

She went back outside and got in her car, but could not put the phone call completely out of her mind. It was like a tiny itch in a place she couldn't scratch.

She drove on down Santa Monica Boulevard to Century City, turning off there onto Avenue of the Stars. Suddenly traffic jammed up in front of her and came to a dead stop.

Joana was anxious now to be at her desk where she could get at the work she had neglected for a week, and here she was stalled

just a block away from her building.

In the unmoving traffic lane next to her an angry-looking man got out of his Volvo and peered up ahead in the street.

Joana leaned across the seat and rolled down the window. “What is it?”

“Some kind of an accident, I guess. I see a police car and an ambulance. Whatever it is, it’s costing me money.” He climbed back into his car and gripped the steering wheel, glaring straight ahead as though trying to melt away the traffic jam with the force of his anger.

Joana looked down at her own hands and saw that she too was tense. She relaxed her grip on the wheel and dropped her hands into her lap. She drew in a deep breath. It was all part of living in the big city. Traffic jams, potholes, smog, earthquakes. You couldn’t do anything about them, so you might just as well be calm.

A police officer stepped out to the middle of the street and began directing traffic. Gradually the cars began to move out. Joana inched her way over into the curb lane so she would be in a position to turn into the parking garage. As she neared the entrance she saw a dark red smear on the pavement near the curb. An ambulance was pulled up there and the white-coated attendant stood in a knot of people talking animatedly to a policeman. Joana looked away from the scene. She had seen all the blood and death lately that she could handle.

She wheeled into the garage entrance and slipped the coded card into the slot. When the wooden cross-arm lifted she drove on down the ramp past the first sublevel and on to the second, where her company had its parking area.

Since she was late this morning, hers was the only car moving in the underground structure. She had to drive almost to the far end before she found a vacant space.

She got out, locked the Datsun, and started to walk back

toward the elevator, located in an island at the center of the vast room. Her footsteps made a hollow echo in the concrete cavern. She shivered under her light sweater. It was cold down there.

For no reason she could name, Joana's feeling of well-being slipped away. The silent cars parked in endless rows, the stark fluorescent lighting, the lingering smell of exhaust fumes, combined to give the underground garage a sinister atmosphere she had never noticed before. Unconsciously she quickened her pace. Her footsteps were the only sound in the vault.

No, there was another.

A soft whirring, clicking sound. Joana stopped to listen. Something about it was familiar, but it was out of place. The sound seemed to be coming from the ramp leading down from the level above.

A shadow flicked across one of the heavy pillars that supported the ceiling. Someone was coming down the incline. Joana could feel the fine hairs on her arms stand up. She stood still, watching the bottom of the ramp.

When the boy on the skateboard rolled into sight she almost laughed with relief.

"Davy, what in the world are you doing down here?"

At the sound of her voice the boy expertly changed his direction and made his way toward her along the rows of parked cars.

"Flowers all sold?" she said. Her voice rang off the concrete, high and unnatural.

The boy maneuvered toward her, pumping with one sneakered foot to maintain his speed.

"Is something the matter?"

Something *was* the matter. It was all wrong. Davy did not belong down here. He never came down here. Something in the boy's attitude as he balanced on the board was stiff and awkward.

Joana began to move again toward the elevator.

Then Davy rolled directly under a lighting fixture and Joana saw his face. It had the frozen, waxy look she had come to know so horribly well. His eyes glittered, his mouth hung slack. As he turned to slice between two cars she saw his head. There was a deep bloody depression behind one ear. Davy had skated through traffic once too often.

Joana was running now for the elevator and safety. Behind her came the relentless whirr of the Polyurethane wheels and the oiled click of ball bearings.

She reached the closed elevator door and slammed the flat of her hand against the up button. The heat-sensitive green arrow lit up, but the doors did not move. The damned car was on another floor. There was no time to wait for it to get here.

Joana looked quickly over her shoulder and saw Davy swerve into the same corridor she was in. Nothing between them now but a flat expanse of concrete. She saw he was carrying in one hand the short, heavy-bladed stem shears he used to trim his flowers.

"Oh, dear God," she cried, and started to run again. The boy on the skateboard was too fast for her in the open corridor, so she darted between the parked cars to the next row over, and the next.

The side mirrors that jutted out from the cars clipped her painfully in the arms and elbows, but she kept running. Behind her Davy had to slow down to maneuver among the cars, but still he gained.

In a panicky surprise, Joana found she had run through all the rows of parked cars and come up against the cold concrete wall of the garage. Behind her the *whirr-click* of the skateboard came on, and on. She made her way along the wall to the ramp leading down to the next-lower level. Running out of control down the curving roadway, she heard a loud thump behind her as Davy crashed into a car and fell. It would delay him, but only for a moment.

She came, out of breath, to the next sub-level. Row upon row of silent automobiles. Not a person in sight. No help here. With scarcely a pause she rounded the corner and ran on down one more level. The *whirr-click* from above told her the skateboard was rolling again.

Bottom level. No one here, either. Just more rows of cars. From up the ramp, the skateboard sound, coming fast.

No more ramps to run down. The elevator — forget it, she would never make it in time. Hide in a car? By the time she found one unlocked, Davy would be on her. Running and dodging among the cars would only buy a little time, and then …

Joana cried out as her foot struck something and she half-stumbled. She looked down and saw a thin, lightweight chain coiled at the side of the ramp. One end was attached to an eyebolt in the concrete wall, the other had a swivel fastener to be hooked to the opposite ramp wall when this level was blocked off.

Without stopping to plan out her moves, Joana picked up the free end of the chain and ran across the ramp, dragging the chain behind her. She crouched there beyond the bulkhead out of sight, holding the chain loose and low. It lay all the way across the floor of the ramp, invisible against the gray concrete.

Whirr-click. The skateboard rounded the last corner above her, and the elongated shadow of the boy crossed the chain and spilled out over the nearest row of parked cars.

Joana gripped the end of the chain, her heart hammering. She saw the skateboarder rolling free and fast, coming down the slope. Davy was holding the stem shears in one hand, balancing himself with the other. The mashed-in head swiveled from side to side as the glittery eyes searched for her among the cars.

With all her strength, Joana pulled up on the end of the chain. It jumped from the pavement and caught the racing skateboard between the fat yellow wheels and the fiberglass board. Davy, his

momentum unbroken, flew forward while the skateboard stayed hung up on the chain.

The boy hit the tinted rear window of a Cadillac. His head smashed through the heavy glass and was trapped, impaled there by the jagged shards. The arms and legs thrashed about in a vain effort to free the head.

Joana still crouched by the side of the ramp, holding the chain with the skateboard caught on it. She stared in near-shock at the struggling figure with its head caught on the shark's teeth of glass. As the body flopped about, the raw edges of glass sawed through the neck, exposing tendons, muscles, and windpipe.

From somewhere up above came the squeal of tires. Joana let go the chain and sagged back against the bulkhead. In seconds Glen's Camaro screeched down the ramp to a stop. A piece of the wooden street-level barrier arm clung to the grille.

Glen leaped from the car and ran to her side. From up the incline came the sound of running feet.

On the broad rear deck of the Cadillac the thrashing body of Davy the flower seller abruptly went limp. It hung there, the head immovably caught on the spears of glass. The last of the walkers was at rest.

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